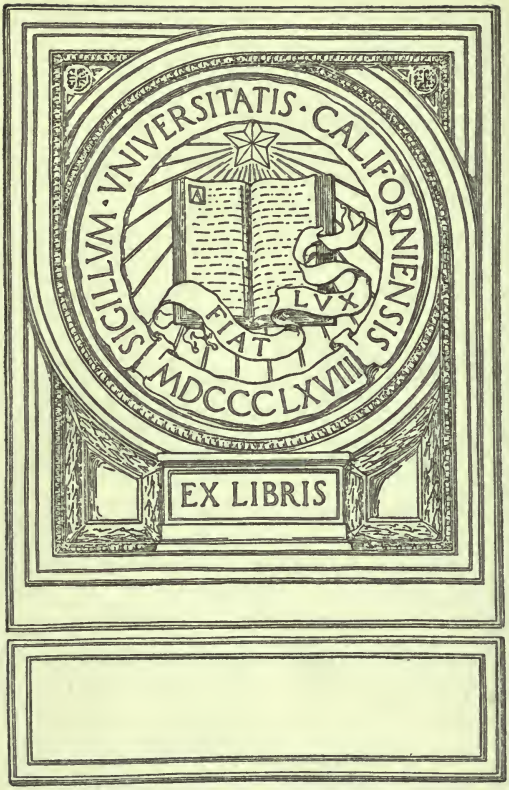
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WIND
ALONG THE WASTE

My eyes had not played tricks on me yesterday

WIND ALONG THE WASTE

BY
GLADYS E. JOHNSON

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WIND ALONG THE WASTE

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CHAPTER I

ANN'S RECEPTION AT DUNE HOUSE

"YOU can see for yourself that there 's nothing to get scared of. Lonely? 'Course it's lonely; so 's every country house, and I suppose some would find sand-dunes more so than the straight country, but if you have a brain in your head — and I think you have; that 's why I engaged you — you are n't going to work up a fit of hysterics and think every shadow 's a ghost and it 's going to bite you!"

Eliza Haldayne finished this tirade with a rather belligerent stare, and I quickly murmured something about "hoping not."

Her quick black eyes galloped about the room. "I think everything you 'll need 's here. The children's room is next to yours. You 'll see 'em in the morning. Hoang brought your baggage up, I see," with a quick glance at my suit-cases placed at the foot of the bed. "Don't open your

windows; night air 's bad. Breakfast 's at eight."

Firing this information jerkily, as one who is unaccustomed to or impatient of wasting remarks, she moved toward the door, the light from the hanging kerosene lamp wickedly painting her bobbing caricature on the walls as she did so.

At the doorway she paused a moment and looked back at my motionless figure bathed in the lamplight. It might have been a trick of the shadows, or perhaps only my fancy, but for a brief instant she seemed about to speak, indecision battling with some other emotion which I could not analyze. Whatever the impulse may have been, it was quickly over. Her middle-aged features slipped back into their usual stern mask and with a curt "Good night" she had disappeared into the hall.

For a moment I stood hesitating in the center of the big, high-ceiled room, chilled more than reassured by the advice I had just received. The lamp cast a cone of yellow light, an enormous splash of color, in the very center of the room. Beyond its radius the shadows gathered ominously, seeming only to await some signal to rush silently upon me. Before the fancy my usual self-possession fled, leaving me feeling very frail and defenseless.

After all, Reason began hysterically, what did

I know about this woman who had engaged me as governess? Even the country was strange to me. The automobile which had brought me from the city had traveled all day to reach this lonely house on the California coast. My sense of direction had given up in despair long ago. I did not know how far we were from San Francisco; I did not know if there was another dwelling within miles.

The thought brought its own panic. I flew silently to the door to lock it. I could see no key and impatiently I grasped the knob to see if it might not be on the outside.

My chilled fingers became aware of an indisputable fact. The knob was held firmly by another hand, out there in the hall.

For the moment that unexpected resistance left me too surprised to cry out. I felt my fingers relax; the great room with its splashes of lamplight swam wildly. The faded red-velvet curtains before the windows were ominously bulky.

The vertigo passed. A hot anger came in its wake and I twisted the knob viciously. This time it gave easily, but the door remained closed. It was locked from without. In stubborn terror I debated the wisdom of shaking the knob frenziedly and screaming until some one should come to release me. Even as the thought pre-

sented itself the futility of such a proceeding became apparent.

I walked slowly back to the friendly cone of light, my eyes furtively taking in every detail of the apartment. The chairs, ugly modifications of Windsors, stupidly carved and stuffily upholstered, cast grotesque shadows on the white plaster walls. The high ceiling was lost in the dusk above; an old-fashioned black walnut wardrobe, towering upward in the gloom, offered frightful suggestions. I deliberately walked the length of the room and boldly flung it open, feeling the roots of my hair tingle as I did so. Its half-doors banged back against the wall, but it was reassuringly empty.

Leaving it gaping, I turned next to those suggestively bulky window hangings. My new employer's warning about opening the windows now leaped to my mind, endowed with new coloring. Advancing as though I intended to return to the neglected suit-cases at the end of the bed, I suddenly wheeled and jerked aside the heavy hangings. Nothing but closed wooden shutters met my wide eyes. These I unbolted, then raised one of the long, narrow sashes.

A rush of fog came to my face and the lamplight fell on a heavy wire mesh completely covering the open area, as effectively as iron bars could have done. No one could get into the room

through the windows, that was certain. It should have been reassuring, but — neither could any one get out.

I closed and bolted the shutters again, struggling hard for self-possession. The windows would have been of no aid, anyway; I had climbed a long flight of stairs to this second-story room. The ground probably lay thirty or more feet below.

I returned to the lamp's circle and gingerly seated myself on the edge of the old-fashioned wooden bed, rendered creaky and rheumatic by long years of ocean dampness.

The vague doubts I had unconsciously entertained all day were now alive three-fold and screaming for recognition. My mind flew back over my brief acquaintance with Eliza Haldayne, searching for some inkling why she should lock up the governess she had just engaged for her sister's children. A more matter-of-fact, unromantic figure than Miss Haldayne it would have been hard to imagine.

I had literally "fallen into" this position. Cramming four years' college work into three, and this coupled with the double task of earning a livelihood at the same time, had brought a physical collapse hand-in-hand with my degree of A.B. My carefully hoarded little capital melted with laughable rapidity. Once on my feet again,

I looked for secretarial work, thanking the lucky star which had included a brief business course of stenography in my curriculum. It was not easy to find. One employment bureau after the other was visited. Discouraged by a day's unsuccessful tramping of wet streets, I had hesitated before a small agency on a side street.

"One more," my will-power coaxed my tired body. "Just this one; then you can go home to a nice mustard footbath." It was a forlorn hope. The place dealt exclusively in domestic servants, and these of the less desirable sort.

I left there quickly, and, because of the tired tears in my eyes and a run-over heel, I was careless in stepping to the wet pavement. I was vastly astonished to find myself on all fours, directly in the path of a tall, big-framed woman who was heading for the entrance.

Even as she helped me to my feet her quick black eyes ran over me, missing no detail of my shabby, would-be-efficient attire, now muddy and wet. She began without preliminaries:

"You just came out of that place. Are you looking for a position?"

Too tired to resent her tone, I answered: 'Yes. But they have n't anything for me. I 'm a stenographer."

"Well, I don't suppose it would kill you to do something else. You 're about twenty-three, I

guess. You look like you had sense. What 's your name? "

At another time this cross-examination would have roused either my indignation or my sense of humor. Now I told her, meekly enough.

" Well, look here, Ann Belmont," she persisted: " I 'm looking for a nurse-girl — a governess, if you like the term better, though I don't care if you can't teach, so long as you have gumption. It 's to take care of two children. Just because the place is in the country the average fool woman thinks it 's lonesome. I 'll pay you twenty a week besides your board; that 's better than you 're liable to get with your stenography. You 're young and you look as if you had sense. Besides, you 're not pretty — I can't stand a pretty fool. Will you come? "

It was rather sudden, and the snob which is in all of us rose within me at what it was pleased to regard as a " menial " position. Eliza Haldayne met every objection and overrode it. Wet feet and the munificent salary backed her up. I was engaged.

Early the next morning, my new employer drove around to my side-street hotel, the only occupant of a clumsy great machine whose height and outside gear-shift and horn proclaimed it the vintage of some ten years before. Like its owner, it was sadly in need of " smartening."

Its coat of shabby black paint had rubbed off in great rusty patches, which, together with the worn leather cushions and a shabby lap-robe, suggested the thought that at some time in its career it had been sadly afflicted with the mange.

Into this ancient relic I piled my two suitcases; then Eliza Haldayne threaded her way through the work-tide of traffic which filled the streets. She chose the San Bruno road out of the city, a thoroughfare leading through the Potrero, San Francisco's poorest quarter. A cold, raw fog had rolled in from the ocean, blurring the outlines of dismal little cottages standing in the midst of their goat pastures. The great tanneries and soap factories loomed indefinite bulks in the grayness, only the human nose defining their presence. The shabby neighborhood was one with the shabby car rolling through it and I was swept along on a great wave of depression. In my summer-weight suit I shivered. For the first time I experienced a sense of uneasiness — foreboding almost — gnawing in the back of my mind.

Yet, even now, sitting here huddled at the foot of the great shadowy bed I had to admit that there was nothing in Eliza Haldayne's appearance to excite alarm. She was only a large-framed, rather commonplace woman in an ugly great-coat, a shabby man's-cap pulled down over

her one beauty, a thick wad of coarse, slightly wavy gray hair. A typical New England spinster she seemed, with a veneer of masculinity added through contact with this Western land. She had been rather silent on the journey down the peninsula, but I was not loquacious at the best of times and we got on well together. When we made a stop beside the dusty highway at noon, and gnawed upon some thick and rather stale cheese sandwiches my employer rooted out from the car's side pocket, I gleaned scant information of my future. I was to have two charges, Miss Haldayne volunteered between vigorous chews, a girl and a boy, children of a dead younger sister. Who else formed the family she had not vouchsafed and I did not ask. My reason was now pouncing upon incongruities in the situation and, rather panic-stricken, forcing them upon me. The appearance of my employer, the disgraceful old car, this very luncheon of stale bread and scraps of cheese when roadside cafés beckoned on all hands — it was incompatible with the really princely salary I was to receive for doubtful ability. Was the lonely location of the place the only reason that she had for baiting it with such tempting wages?

All through the long, warm day the car had limped south, down the highway. In the late afternoon the presence of fog once more betrayed

the ocean to be not far off. We had turned from the main road long ago and were running between broad, flat fields that soon alternated with sandy patches.

Now once more memory prodded me to fearful alertness. There had been one incident, which at the time I had put down to mere eccentricity but which now, viewed in the light of that locked door, took on new meaning.

Where the asphalt had ceased and the drifted sand piled in little hummocks on the road, the woman had stopped the car and, climbing capably over the back of the front seat as a man might have done, she began to rummage in the tonneau, finally emerging with rusty side curtains.

Involuntarily I had spoken my amazement. "Why, Miss Haldayne, the wind has died down! I was thinking how nice and mild it was."

Even through the thickening dusk I had seen Eliza Haldayne's lips tighten as though she were displeased. "I know what I 'm about," she retorted tartly. "I guess I know this country better than you do. Here, catch a-hold that corner."

The car had been completely covered when she finished, even to the point of enclosing the driver's seat until its occupants could not possibly be recognized by one looking in from the

road. In the fog and gathering dusk this seemed to me sheerest insanity, but there was a determination in the woman's manner which kept my opinions unspoken. She was working with desperate haste as though spurred on by the darkness. Subconsciously my nerves responded. I found myself glancing over my shoulder, though the flat, dusky country for miles appeared deserted.

When Eliza Haldayne climbed back to the driver's seat and released the brake it had been to urge the old rattle-trap to the limit of its speed. At the time I had thought her only anxious to arrive home before the road was totally dark and I blamed my own too-vivid imagination.

The car was running then between sand-dunes and fields mixed,— links, my Scotch ancestors would have called them. A thick white fog was bearing down from above; a straggling growth of lichens kept the sand from drifting and in some instances had thrown suckers across the road, showing that it was but little traveled. On the curves a distant white ocean came to view through drifting fog, but it did not hold my eyes. Despite my common sense, I numbly watched the road unreel, shrinking involuntarily when the wheels scrunched over the lichens. Though it grew quite dark, Miss Haldayne did not stop to

light the lamps. We rattled along in the growing blackness, the woman beside me driving as though she possessed the eyes of a cat.

Not until we were almost upon it did I see the house. Against the background of lofty sand-dunes its black bulk lost proportion, but one sensed its height. No hospitable light shone from the windows: they might have been boarded up, for their blackness. In the darkness I stumbled over shallow wooden steps leading to a front veranda. There was no way of seeing the building's surroundings; the fog lay like wet, thick cotton on everything, blotting out the stars. I was forced to fight down a silly fit of panic, panic of which I was a trifle ashamed when the front door suddenly opened and a flare of lamplight fell on our faces.

Now, my nerves still twitching because of that inexplainably locked door, I remembered that Eliza Haldayne had shoved me ahead of her into the hall, with almost rude haste, and that her grim features had relaxed only when the door was safely bolted behind us.

Here the first peculiarity of the old house had been forced upon me. An amazing number of lamps, kerosene lamps of all sizes and descriptions, blazed wherever one turned. Far down the long hall we faced they winked back at me; twinkling from what seemed to be myriads of

little wooden shelves jutting out of the walls to hold them. Not a dark corner existed anywhere; even the stairs leading to the second floor were lit — a prodigal waste of oil, and incongruous when those stale cheese sandwiches were recalled. The rooms branching on each side of the hall weltered in lamplight, but heavy wooden shutters and thick hangings over the windows had kept the friendly gleam from penetrating to us outside.

A silent Chinese servant grasped my suit-cases and disappeared with them up a crooked flight of stairs; yet when, scarcely a minute later, we entered the chilly, high-ceiled dining-room it was to find him placidly waiting on the table. Hoang, I was to discover, possessed the rather startling faculty of appearing to be in two places at once.

There had been nothing at this time to arouse the wild speculations I now entertained. Eliza Haldayne continued silent, but her silence had lost its tense quality now, and was merely that of preoccupation. The others, she informed me briefly while she chewed some cold meat, had gone to bed; they kept early hours at Dune House. Just who "the others" might be I was left to speculate in silence. Her preoccupation lasted until she had preceded me up the crooked stairs and shown me this shadowy bedroom on

the second floor. Her tone, though brusk, was kind. There was nothing to warn me that I was to be locked as a prisoner in the room as soon as she had left. Turn and grope as my mind would, it could find no explanation of the mystery other than eccentricity.

I grasped at this straw of comfort eagerly. Eccentricity stops at locking doors. Nevertheless I was taking no chances. All the horror-stories I had secretly read in childhood, all the disquieting tales of violence now flocked gleefully into my quaking brain. There was that comforting little legend of the traveler in the lonely inn who wakes in time to see the canopy of the bed descending to crush his unsuspecting form.

I rose rather hastily and looked at the bed. The old-fashioned roll top sported no canopy, but I was not waiting for it to grow one. With grim determination I tugged a great feather mattress to a far corner. If anything was to enter the room in the night and grope its way to the bed, I did n't intend to be there. My fingers shook as I loosened the laces of my shoes. That completed my toilet for the night, for, after an inward debate, I decided that if I was to be murdered in my sleep I preferred at least to have the moral support of my outer clothes.

One other ray of comfort was vouchsafed,— a tall and heavy brass candlestick whose maker

must have foreseen its utility as a weapon. With this in my hand and a shaking little prayer in my heart I turned the lamp low and blew it out.

As the flame flickered down to a dim violet glow I groped my way to my bed on the floor. The damp smell of the fog filled the room — I had opened the tall window — but a weak, watery moon was struggling to break through. Even as I huddled down in the cold billows of feathers its thin light triumphed, the shadow of the wire mesh grew on the floor.

With wide eyes I watched the light wax stronger. It crept up, striking the bow-leg of a chair, slanting across the foot of the wooden bedstead. Up the panels of the door at the farther end of the chilly room it moved, until its pale light quivered on the brass knob.

Then the roots of my hair began to tingle, my heart was smothered. Under my eyes that knob turned, turned gently, then came silently to rest again as though a tentative hand made sure that it was still locked. There was no sound either inside or outside the room. For what seemed an eternity of time I sat rigidly upright among the feather billows, my eyes glued to the now motionless knob. It was the candlestick's sharp base cutting into my palm which finally forced my attention.

With the relaxation of the muscles the mental strain eased a little. Still too tense even to speculate, I cautiously shifted to a more restful position and leaning back on the pillows I fixed my watchful eyes on the door.

CHAPTER II

JOAN'S "BLUEBEARD CHAMBER"

IN the cold light of morning I flattened my face to the wire mesh covering the windows and tried to see the surroundings among which I had chosen to live. The house stood in dreary isolation in the midst of interminable sand-dunes. An unkempt garden sloped beneath the window, the steep, dried flower beds bearing out the desolation I had sensed last night. Only a few scattered sea-pinks and some lupine shrubs — long purple spikes of flowers swaying on gray-green twisted branches, whose seeds had evidently been blown in by the wind — put pale color in the scene. A ragged evergreen hedge, its seaward branches twisted and bare, edged the place. It was Swinburne's "Forsaken Garden."

> The sun burns sere and the rain dishevels
> One gaunt bleak blossom of scentless breath.
> Only the wind here hovers and revels
> In a round where life seems barren as death.

The fog was high. By flattening my face until the wire mesh painted its dirty counterpart on

my nose I caught glimpses of a small open bay edged by a dreary, seaweed-dotted beach.

For a minute or two I stood flattened there, the dismalness of the scene soaking into my spirit. An impudent sea-gull wheeling close screamed derisively at me and turned me to hunting for my comb and brush.

The terror of the night before had worn off. Investigation this morning showed me that the door was unlocked; the key was on the outside. Despite my terror sleep had stolen upon me. Sometime during the night, while I lay in helpless unconsciousness, some one had stealthily unlocked the door. The thought was unpleasant. My indignation mounted with my hair and when I stood ready to go downstairs I was entirely in possession of every faculty save my temper.

I removed all signs of my improvised bed on the floor, feeling a little foolish as I did so. The menace of the shadows had disappeared. The room was nothing, now, more than the upper bedroom of a rambling great house; the curtains held no ominous bulkiness, the heavy furniture was more frankly ugly, less fearfully grotesque.

A glance at the door as I stepped into the hall showed an empty lock. The key was gone.

The upper hall appeared to stretch the length of the house and to parallel the lower one I had traversed last night. At both ends it plunged

down a flight of steep and crooked stairs. I counted seven doors shut blindly on it, but if anything living lay behind them no sound betrayed it. On this floor I lingered only long enough to glance out at the window in the bend of the stairs. It gave upon a dreary vista of dun-colored sand-dunes, billowing away into the distance; and, like the ones in my bedroom, was entirely covered by a heavy wire mesh.

A slight sound behind me whirled me about, all nerves. The Chinese servant I had seen last night was watching me, unpleasantly close. There was something in his unsmiling scrutiny, something hostile that I sensed in his bearing that caused an instant antagonism to leap full grown within me. I don't like people kitty-catting up behind me and said so frankly, finding relief in speech. He waited stolidly until I had finished, then informed me that "Missy Haldayne say come breakfast," and glided ahead of me to show the way.

After the chill of that red-hung bedroom this new scene was commonplacely reassuring. In the breakfast-room Eliza Haldayne sat entrenched behind the coffee urn, clad in a freshly starched and severe brown gingham. On her right was a drably blond, middle-aged woman who had reached the fat and sighing stage of existence. On her left two solemn-faced, thin

children sat silently attacking their breakfast oatmeal. A place for me had been laid at the end of the table.

Eliza Haldayne received me with a curt but not unfriendly nod.

"G' morning. This is my sister, Drusilla Haldayne, Ann Belmont, and these are the children, Joan and Harry Statler."

It was one of Miss Haldayne's characteristics that she invariably dispensed with titles. She generally used one's two names in conjunction and threw the handles overboard.

Miss Drusilla, as I afterward came to call her, looked up with a flicker of interest in her large, languishing blue eyes and breathed a gusty welcome. A glance from her sister shut off her ramblings and allowed me to slip into my chair. The children were shyly curious, their pale little faces stretching out on thin necks, as sickly plants stretch toward the sun. The surprise I felt at their appearance amounted almost to shock. I had pictured sturdy young savages, brown and hardy from tumbling about the sand-dunes. These youngsters had the appearance of people too much indoors.

My polite attempts at conversation met with no encouragement. Meals were rather silent affairs at Dune House, I was to discover. After that first large-eyed survey, the children ate

steadily, almost fearfully, their eyes on their plates, embarrassed as children will become under too rigid control. Miss Drusilla's conversation consisted of complaints aimed at Hoang, carried on in a monotonous whining undertone until the significance of my name caught her flickering interest.

"Belmont? I knew some people of the same name once — quite a prominent family they were. They owned a magnificent home in San Francisco. Land, the dances and balls I went to there! But that was in other days." The bitterness of that last phrase stirred even my uninitiated brain and a faint pity was born in my heart.

"I 'm afraid I can't claim kin with the rich Belmonts," I answered, trying to speak lightly. "I 've heard of them; they were prominent in early California society."

"That 's the family!" Miss Drusilla put in eagerly. Her vacant blue eyes lit up with a flare of interest. "There was a brother of the girls, a handsome young gallant. The girls used to tease me about him; quite wild about me they said he was." She giggled insinuatingly and paused to take a bite of bread and butter.

There was something so grotesque about that mountain of pale, flabby flesh recalling love-affairs that I know I stared rudely. It did not

annoy Miss Drusilla. On the contrary, my too frank expression was taken for admiring interest. She nodded coyly over the bread and butter.

"That 's so. They were dreadfully afraid that he would do something desperate when I refused him; quite the catch of the season he was, too. Yellow, I wore the night he proposed, I always could wear yellow and you know so many girls look sallow in it. It was made with a bertha of rose-point. I remember a lovely Englishman — he was a captain in the Black Watch — told me that I looked like a slender daffodil —"

Her ramblings abruptly ran down and jerked into silence. Eliza Haldayne had turned her prominent black eyes on her sister.

"Hoang, more coffee." Her voice boomed out and effectually blocked conversation.

When we rose from the table I intercepted my employer as she was following the others from the room.

"Miss Haldayne, a curious thing happened last night." I strove to keep my voice expressionless. "Just after you left my room I tried the door. It was locked on the outside."

The black eyes before me never wavered. Nor did my own. For a brief moment we silently regarded each other. Then the woman spoke quietly. "You must be mistaken, Ann. Who would wish to lock you in your room?"

I answered as quietly: "I can't imagine what their object would be, Miss Haldayne. It must n't happen again."

"That door sticks. That 's what you mistook for being locked in. I 'll have Hoang fix it to-day."

"Some one tried the knob last night, after I was in bed. I saw it turn, in the moonlight."

We still held each other's gaze. "I hope you are n't going to develop nerves, Ann."

"I 'm not afraid." I was inwardly applauding my noncommittal tone. Except for the burning of my cheeks my manner was as composed as that of the woman before me. "However, the door must be fixed, so it does n't — stick."

Another long stare, then the black eyes were jerked away. "Of course," she said in a matter-of-fact tone. "Now, come with me and I 'll show you the children's room."

The children's room was reassuringly obvious. Once a sort of upstairs double parlor, its folding-doors were flung wide to make it one apartment. Two little beds graced an alcoved place at one end, showing that it served the purpose of a complete nursery.

As Miss Haldayne left us the two pale children came forward politely to receive me. Again I was overcome by the incongruity of their frail little bodies and their sturdy surroundings.

"Would n't you like me to take you for a run on the beach?" I asked as I put an arm about each, grieved to find how completely my reach could encircle their slenderness. The sun was breaking through the fog now and I longed to put some life and color into those pale babies.

They stood uneasily under the caress. Only too evidently it was a strange experience for them. Joan, the elder, finally spoke:

"We could n't. Aunt Eliza won't let us. We play in here and sometimes, when it 's nice and bright, she lets us play on the ocean veranda for an hour or two."

"You never go out!" My amazement fairly exploded from me.

Joan, a solemn little mite of eight, contented herself with shaking her head, her serious dark eyes fixed on my face as though trying to read my expression.

My indignation flared up. The poor youngsters were virtually prisoners in that great dismal house. That explained the pale faces, the macaroni-like bones. At that moment Eliza Haldayne became to my indignant fancy a child-devouring ogre. "Why, that 's absurd!" I was bursting out unwisely, when those two steady stares recalled me.

"There 's lots of toys. Would you like me to show them to you?" The little boy spoke in

a monotonously polite tone. "There's a new steam-engine that runs around the room; only it won't run any more. Maybe you could make it work if you tried."

He led the way to a great closet at the end of the room and opened the door to show a conglomeration of playthings systematically stored within. I was treated to another surprise. Never outside of a toy shop had I seen such an expensive array. A doll-house four feet high stood complete, from the little red-brick chimney and its "mahogany" dining-room set to the toy mop standing behind the miniature kitchen range. Expensive and intricate mechanical toys were stored in Harry's end of the space. A great doll, as large as Joan herself, sat in a rocker and stared at us out of heavily fringed blue eyes.

Toys that would make the average child delirious with delight; toys which must have cost a small fortune and which accorded ill with the shabby automobile and the general air of cheeseparing which overhung the rest of the house. It was as though this means had been taken to make up to the children for their lost liberty. I was compelled to revise my opinion of Miss Haldayne. Surely she was not indifferent to children when she bought them playthings such as these! It must be misdirected zeal which caused her to keep the children virtual prisoners.

Outside, in the hall, I found her and spoke in a carefully casual tone. "I want to take the children for a run on the beach, Miss Haldayne. It 's a pity to waste a fine day."

The woman paused in her quick, businesslike walk and faced me squarely, her lips pursed over her large square teeth. "I don't want the children running around the dunes. No telling what might happen to them. Tramps." She jerked out the phrases characteristically.

The obvious weakness of that emboldened me to protest.

"Why, there are n't likely to be tramps on this lonely shore! Besides, I 'll be with them all the time. The children must have more sun, Miss Haldayne. They 'll fall ill if they don't get out more."

The unspoken accusation in my tone appeared to make her wince inwardly. Unconsciously, as I later found out, I had flicked the tenderest spot of her conscience: the fulfilment of her duty.

Her prominent black eyes shifted to the mesh-covered window.

"All right. Go ahead, then. But only for an hour and that in the middle of the day. Down on the beach 's all right. Don't go out of my sight. Don't take 'em over the dunes, either. Mind that; I don't want them near the dunes on

the east of the house. If you can't heed that they 'll not go at all."

The bruskness of her tone roused my indignation, but I answered with all the quiet dignity at my disposal: "I 'm only thinking of the children's good, Miss Haldayne. I have no desire to go any place you forbid."

Her eyes jerked back to me with a glint of apologetic humor in their black depths. "A porcupine can't grow ostrich plumes," she gave out cryptically; which was as near an apology as any human being had ever received from Eliza Haldayne.

At the unusual prospect of a run on the beach the children shed their gnome-like strangeness and became normal youngsters. After one abashed moment at the novelty of it, the little girl flung herself at my neck and clung there with an unchildish ferocity that touched and startled me.

"I love you, I love you lots, Miss Belmont!" she whispered, almost fiercely, down my collar. "I feel like girls in books I 've read. Oh, I 'm so happy!"

Shaken almost to the point of tears by this, and gaining mental relief in thinking murderous thoughts of the severe woman downstairs, I bundled them into their coats. The unexpected

liberty acted as a Moses's rod on their high spirits. One each side of me they had begun to chatter like little magpies, finding a hysterical relief in turning their little brains inside out for my benefit, heaping me with scraps of the books they had read, of the queer mental games they played together, of all the weird happenings of a too-precocious imagination. I was all the more amazed to hear silence fall like a blight on each chattering voice and feel the reluctant lag in their footsteps as I started bustling down the hall with them.

"Why, what is it, Joan?" I asked the little girl. The hall was empty, yet both children were staring down its dreary length with wide, dreading eyes.

"Miss Belmont, let's go down the other stairs." It was Harry who piped up.

"Why?" I asked curiously. My gaze followed theirs. My room and theirs were located at about the center of the hall. At one end was the crooked staircase down which I had descended to breakfast that morning. That other duplicated it exactly, even to the long, narrow red-curtained window which stood in the bend midway and gazed sullenly over lupine-dotted sand-dunes.

There was nothing else, so far as I could see; yet the children had come to a dead stop and

their eyes were fixed on the staircase in fascinated horror.

"Why, Harry? Why should we use the other stairs?"

This time it was Joan who replied, her eyes still focussed in dread. "There 's a room at the bottom we must n't go into. Harry and I call it Bluebeard's Chamber."

"Why must n't you go in?" I was secretly proud of the humorous off-handedness of my tone, which gave no suspicion of the fearful thrill that overswept me at that awed little whisper.

Joan shook her head. "Aunt Eliza told us that we never must. And she looked so — so angry and she frowned so, that we were scared."

"Of course it 's right for you to obey your aunt," I came back righteously. "She probably had some good reason for not wanting you in there, but I don't think you need be afraid."

They shook their heads in concert, not in the least reassured. "Nobody 's allowed to go there, — Aunt Drusilla neither. Hoang never goes there. Only Aunt Eliza, one day. Harry dared me and I tiptoed to the stairs and hid behind the window-curtain. I said I was n't afraid, but I was. And I looked between a little slit in the curtain down at the door of the Bluebeard Chamber. It was sort of dark down there. Then I heard some one open the door and I thought I 'd

nearly die, but it was only Aunt Eliza coming out. She looked awful cross and I ran upstairs and down the hall to our room as fast as I could. I felt like I was going to die and my heart beat like *any*thing."

It was a relief to the high-strung child to pour out to an older person the crammings of her fearful little brain.

"But when the door was open, could you see in back of your aunt? Into the room?"

I knew that I should not have asked this of those trusting youngsters, but my own curiosity was growing alarmingly.

Joan shook her head; her voice was a scared whisper. "I could n't see good, I was so scared. Afterward I tried to remember, to tell it to Harry. It was all dark. It looked like the shutters were fastened over the windows, and all I could see was something all shiny, like a terrible face. It looked straight at me. Oh-h!" She shivered.

In spite of myself the words sent a chill along my own backbone. "You must have imagined it, dear. It is probable your aunt has the room shut up only to save cleaning." I guessed with false heartiness. But my tone did not convince myself, let alone those frightened youngsters.

We descended the other stairs to the lower floor. The broad lower veranda was deserted;

the sun had conquered the last of the fog army and lay reassuringly warm and golden on the weather-stained boards. The fierce winds which rose every afternoon were sleeping as yet; the dunes stretched in tawny drowsiness under the arch of a lapis lazuli sky. Twisting and turning until it was lost in the distant haze stretched the road we had traveled last night, a dun-colored ribbon between hummocks of sand. The ocean was running high and green; the ugly stretch of beach which bordered the little bay at low tide was covered. The scene was not without a certain lonely charm this morning.

Freed from the house's depressing atmosphere, the children chirped like shivering little sparrows thawing in the sun. My own spirits bounded upward. I had let my imagination run away with my common sense, Reason scolded. That episode of the locked door was doubtless the peculiarity of an eccentric countrywoman. Miss Drusilla certainly suggested no mystery. The children had worked a fascinating but ridiculous mystery about a locked room; I was here to curtail that tendency in them, not to encourage it.

Strong with a mightly carelessness, I shot a half-challenging glance over my shoulder at the old building basking in the growing heat.

It stared insolently back with blank sun-

flooded eyes. The front veranda was still deserted, but my gaze was drawn to the outjutting bay-window of the parlor on the corner. Half hidden though she was by the velvet hangings, I recognized the great square form of Eliza Haldayne,—not, as one might think, looking after the skipping forms of the children, but with head turned fearfully, unwaveringly upon the eastern sand-dunes of which she had warned us.

CHAPTER III

SHADOWS OF FEAR

TRYING to write consecutively of the events of my first few weeks at Dune House, I find myself baffled. There were no events, to be strictly truthful. The every-day tasks of teaching and playing with the children; of first listening to, then trying to avoid Miss Drusilla's fatuous and tiresome ramblings, and reading the books I had brought down with me, can hardly come under that head. As to the mystery which I felt underlying everything, that knowledge of something wrong which I had sensed since the first night of my arrival, it refused to come out into the open with any one happening, but skulked behind every word and every action with maddening vagueness.

After that one passage of words between us, Miss Haldayne raised no objection to my taking the children for a run on the beach each day. And though the sight of her, always half concealed behind the hangings of the bay-window when I did so, gnawed irritatingly at my

nerves, I did not appear to notice; nor did I allow it to turn me from my purpose.

For a long time I could not classify the vague emotion which appeared to underlie the actions of the three adults. At the quiet meals, broken only by flabby Miss Drusilla's rambling monologues or Miss Haldayne's curt orders to Hoang, I tried to analyze it.

Relations between the two sisters, it was easy to see, were strained; in fact, they had reached the stage of actual dislike, garrulous and spiteful on Miss Drusilla's part, contemptuous on Miss Haldayne's. One felt it as an almost tangible undercurrent. Though obviously afraid of her sister, Miss Drusilla took the delight of a mischievous child in irritating her with trifles,—gnat stings which the older woman brushed impatiently away, pausing to take a determined slap at them only when plagued beyond endurance.

At first this rather amused me. Later, it got on my nerves. My first pity for Miss Drusilla had given way to a very whole-hearted exasperation, once she had trailed me about the house, pouring her whining complaints in my ears. She had cause enough for them, poor woman, but it was impossible to see that jellyfish-like mound of flesh giving itself the airs and graces of a coquettish young beauty without becoming

annoyed. The only time I had ever caught Miss Haldayne in anything save a preoccupied alertness had been an afternoon when I tried unsuccessfully to turn Miss Drusilla's conversation from her droned recollections of social triumphs. My answers had degenerated into perfunctory monosyllables, a fact which mattered not in the least to the flabby creature who had fastened upon me, octopus fashion, and was determined to drain me of the last vestige of interest.

Looking up in exasperation, I saw Eliza Haldayne watching us from the door of the shadowy dining-room. That swift upward glance of mine surprised a sardonic gleam of humor in her black eyes.

It was only for a second; then she had turned on her broad heel and left us, but that brief instant had flung an invisible bond between us. I had caught a glimpse of her rare human side and ever after that she seemed more approachable, less severely capable.

Later I was to have further revealment of this side of her character. That night, when the children were in bed, she entered the room where I sat reading and stood rather grimly regarding me. She had something on her mind. It came out abruptly. There was little beating about the bush with Eliza Haldayne.

"Do you think my sister 's pretty?"

That term, in connection with the creature I had disrespectfully named in secret the "white rabbit," brought me up gasping.

"Lord, no!" I brought it forth with unflattering sincerity.

The other woman regarded me musingly. "Hum-m-m. Not now, perhaps. Look in there."

She pointed a spatulate finger at a faded blue-plush covered album which occupied an honored and isolated place on the lower shelf of a hideously carved what-not. Obediently I opened the fat volume.

There was the usual collection of homely and self-conscious strangers encased in the gold filigree, bewhiskered men with too much neck and too little collar, women with frizzed hair, clothed in basques and balloon sleeves; an old man with fierce bright eyes peering from a jungle of side whiskers whom I took to be the father of them both; the likeness of a slender half-grown girl so much like Joan that I knew it for her mother, then two pictures, side by side on the page, which left me gasping. How they managed to be so different, yet at the same time so cruelly alike, I could not say. A beautiful fair-haired young woman looked up at me from clear, childish eyes. The fresh young face was perfect in contour and, one judged, perfect in coloring. The neck rose

flower-like from the elaborate ruffle of an evening dress. Opposite, in cruel contrast, was a photograph of the other sister taken apparently at the same time. The fierce black eyes burned as zealously as they did now; the mouth was stubborn and wide, the thin face surmounted an uncompromising linen collar. But this my eyes took in only briefly; like a steel to the magnet the flower-like beauty of the other face drew and held them.

"That — that can't be Miss Drusilla!" and my tone had an unflattering edge of amazement upon it.

Though her expression had not changed, I knew that my shocked disbelief had not displeased Miss Haldayne.

"She was twenty-five then. She was beautiful."

"Yes, she was beautiful — then," I stammered, staring at the picture in fascination. Before my eyes the round girlish chin multiplied, the soft cheeks became jowls, the firm sweet neck grew gross and flabby. I closed the book with a queer repulsion and found that Miss Haldayne had left the room.

"One thing sure, Ann Belmont," I told myself in triumph that night as I piled into the great wooden bed, "you've discovered Miss Haldayne's weak spot. She was jealous of her

beautiful sister in days gone by and the habit 's become chronic. Grotesque as it sounds, she 's still jealous of that flabby mountain of flesh."

For a long time I remained awake, lost in the enormousness of the bed, watching the weak moon stamp the reflection of the meshed window on the faded carpet as I tried to picture the life of the sisters years before. Miss Haldayne's words when she engaged me floated back now with new meaning: "You 're not pretty — I can't stand a pretty fool."

I could imagine childish slights piling up; the pettings and luxuries ever awarded the pretty child while the iron entered the starved, lonely soul of the other.

"But it was something deeper than that," I sagely protested. Childhood slights alone never brought that look into Miss Haldayne's eyes. What did two women ever quarrel over, deeply, bitterly? What but a man? One had attracted where the other had not. Apparently neither had won. "It was a man!" I assured myself solemnly, more than a little pleased at my Sherlock Holmes qualifications. "Good Lord, what a scene they must have raised between them!" And satisfied with my solution, I turned over and went to sleep.

From then on I sensed the undercurrent of antagonism more keenly. So intent was I in

reading into the actions of the sisters my own suspicions that I lost sight of those other mysteries which had baffled me. Throughout one morning of teaching Joan and Harry, the impulse to search the old album for some loose thread to the solution tortured me. I found myself watching the clock, waiting for school hours to be over, that I might hurry to the little sitting-room where it lay on the carved what-not.

With the daily run on the sand, since my advent as playmate and confidante, the youngsters had developed into more normal beings and after their study time they called, with the tyranny of the average child, for a promised romp. My intention became more deeply rooted the more it was postponed and I slipped away at the first chance, flushed and breathless from a pillow-fight, slid into the hall, and sped wildly to the staircase before my tormentors should discover and follow.

I took the stairs two at a time, but silently. The door — much to my surprise, for the room was used as a small sitting-room by both sisters — was closed. It had always stood ajar before this, its sedate old furniture, fetched from "around the Horn," grouped primly around a marble-topped center-table. I was about to grasp the knob, knowing that neither Miss Haldayne nor her sister was liable to be in it at

this hour of the day; when a smothered shriek from the shadowy hall behind me suspended my hand in mid-air and set my scalp a-tingle.

"Not in there! Never go in there!" It was Miss Drusilla's voice and it was edged with genuine fright.

I wheeled, to find her regarding me, white-faced and breathless, from the dark depths of a small linen closet.

In my headlong rush to escape Joan and Harry I had bolted down the wrong stairs and my hand had been on the knob of the forbidden room. The pile of sheets dropped to the floor in her agitation showed what Miss Drusilla's occupation had been. Now she bent and automatically recovered them. Even her wheezing held a frightened note. As for me, my heart was beating high, but I brazoned it out.

"It 's my mistake. I got mixed on the staircases. I meant to go into the sitting-room."

Miss Drusilla now creaked over to me, the sheets clasped in her arms, making her more tremendous than ever.

"Ann, don't let Miss Haldayne know you started to open that door. Of course it 's locked anyway, but still —"

"Why?" I could n't resist putting in.

"My sister does n't like it. She won't let any one go in there."

"Why?" I asked again. It was rude, but I was so filled with curiosity as to be indifferent, for the time being, to good manners.

The woman was making obvious efforts to draw me from the fatal door lest her sister appear on the stairway above us. "I don't know why," and her voice was almost tearfully agitated. "But don't go near there, Ann. Miss Haldayne will be furious."

So evident was her distress that I let her lead me away, catching the contagion of her fear as we passed along the dark hall.

At the door of the sitting-room she turned, the light from the window falling on her dough-like face. She was more composed, though her breathing was still a heavy wheeze. She spoke with a ludicrous attempt at dignity, as though to counterbalance the terror she had shown.

"There 's nothing, of course, to be excited over. It 's just a room we never use and my sister has shut it up. It 's only a whim of hers, but we never cross it; she 's rather set in her ways, you know, Ann."

I did know and as she left me I turned and walked slowly upstairs to the children again, all thoughts of searching the old album driven from my head.

The days which followed alternated for me between exciting dread and a scornful ridicule

of myself when I thought I was seeing mystery where none existed.

"You 're a fool, my dear Ann," I would tell myself severely. "What have you to build your suspicions upon save two impolite and unpleasant elderly women, two pale youngsters kept too much indoors from misdirected zeal, a door locked upon you once — unpleasant, certainly, but not fatal — and an old room shut from the rest of the house?"

And for a brief spell it seemed that I had called the turn. One day's program was maddeningly like the rest. The entire household rose at seven-thirty and thirty minutes later ate breakfast together in the breakfast-room on the ocean side of the house. Hoang, though I had never recovered from my first dislike of him, I had to admit was an ideal servant. How he managed to cook the food and at the same time serve it so punctiliously I could never understand. His blue-linened, silent figure was always in attendance whenever one put out one's hand for an article.

From nine to ten I trotted the children on the beach, putting them through a brisk race that sent our circulation tingling. Joan was developing golden freckles on her round childish nose and Harry was more like a normal boy, less like a six-year-old ghost. The wind and the sun

was changing me, as well. Standing before my mirror one day, noting the yellow glints the sun had coaxed into my wind-ruffled hair, the loss of the dark circles of anxiety about my eyes, the natural oval of my face complied by wholesome food and unbroken rest at night, I thought resentfully that Miss Haldayne need n't have laid *quite* so much emphasis on my lack of prettiness the day she engaged me.

School hours took up the time to one-thirty. A sort of story-telling game, lessons had degenerated into, warranted to raise the hands of the orthodox in holy horror. But allowance should be made; ex-stenographers cannot be expected to proceed along the line of attack adopted by the regulation schoolmarm, and oddly enough the children did seem to be learning something under my instruction.

At two-thirty Miss Drusilla could be heard wheezing heavily along the hall to her bedroom. One was likely to find Miss Haldayne flying up and down the lower hall armed with dust-cloth or broom, preoccupied, her lips pursed over her large square teeth while she hummed a tuneless little tune like the droning of an extremely busy bee. While she was never anything save brusk, her manner was not unkind. I think in her peculiar way she had become rather fond of me, though her affection was absolutely free from

demonstration, one way or the other. Only to Hoang and me was vouchsafed this impersonal approval, as though in her own mind we were accepted as intellectual peers.

Being thus classed with the Oriental was hardly flattering. To save my soul I could not help regarding him with a vague dislike, with suspicion; though of what I suspected him, it would be hard to say. There was something in his suddenly materializing behind you when he was thought to be at the other end of the house, something in the shock of raising your eyes to find his unwinking black ones scrutinizing you, which was disconcerting, to put it mildly.

Even Miss Drusilla, though generally oblivious of everything save her own verbal ramblings, unconsciously sensed this and made no attempt to conceal her antipathy to " that heathen " as she called him. This term was a little unfair, as I discovered one day when I passed Hoang's half-opened door and caught a quick flash of the worn Bible which lay on his corner table.

The only change in our daily program occurred when Miss Haldayne made a trip in the machine to the nearest town for supplies. For days before this would happen I could sense a rigidly concealed dread in her mind, a grim buckling up to some disagreeable task which must be done. It was always early morning when she started,

very early, for she was missing from breakfast at such times, and in the full glare of afternoon the old machine would be seen limping on its return trip along the lichen-grown road winding through the sand-dunes. After such times I thought I could detect a visible relief in her face and voice, as though some danger had been safely rounded.

Her self-control was marvelous. She was one of those stoical women who look upon a confession of troubles as a sign of weakness. That was why I was the more amazed when she suddenly stopped me one morning as I was leaving the deserted breakfast-table.

Miss Drusilla ambled on, her creaking corsets appearing to protest on their own account. The children had run ahead; we were alone. I thought my employer was about to make some comment on my method with the children and a trifle uneasily I was reviewing the past weeks in my mind. Then I raised my eyes to hers as she turned from the window to face me. I almost recoiled visibly. Her face was tense and gray with fright.

CHAPTER IV

WATCHING

THE clatter of Harry's heavy little shoes on the uncarpeted parts of the stairs floated back into the breakfast-room and was the only sound to break the strained silence. The sight of the generally stoical woman before me so unmistakably shaken, set my cowardly spirit atremble within me and I had great trouble keeping my face expressionless.

I must have been successful, for Miss Haldayne spoke abruptly as soon as the last faint scuffle told that the children had reached the upper hall. Her forehead was more deeply creased than usual, but her tone was grim and her words as acid as ever:

"Ann, are you one of those busy people who have to stick their noses into everything and have a black-and-white explanation of everything before they do it?"

My craven soul was shaking, but I answered this cryptic question stoutly enough:

"I hope not, Miss Haldayne. It does n't sound pleasant. Why?"

"Will you help me? — do me a favor?" She put it grudgingly enough, running true to a life-long habit of conferring and desiring no favors.

"If I can." I was secretly proud of my non-committal tone.

"I want you to stand in the bay-window in the back parlor and watch the sand-dunes toward the east. I 'm watching the front — I know you saw me — but I have n't eyes in the back of my head and I can't watch two places at once."

"Why in the world do you do it?" was on the tip of my indiscreet tongue, but luckily I remembered and changed it to a quiet, "And if I see anything?"

I received an approving glance. "Tell me, of course."

She led the way through the hall to the gloomy back parlor. I followed, heart pounding, face rigidly wooden, imagination aflame and running wildly once more.

At this early hour the side of the house was in deep shadow. The room was austere and cold, the solemn black walnut furniture stared unbendingly back at me. The high lights of the glass of half-seen pictures on the wall were unpleasantly reminiscent of Joan's "shiny thing."

Outside the sun had broken through the fog

and the dunes already swam in an ocean of light. My mind was clamoring to know the reason for all this mystery, but any spoken curiosity had been effectively blocked by that remark anent "busy people."

Here Miss Haldayne ensconced me behind the curtain. My figure would be hidden to any one looking up from outside, by the half-folded-back shutter. My gaze was focussed through the wire mesh to the trackless sand.

It was very still and a little awesome when Miss Haldayne had left, securely shutting the door which led to the hall. The thickness of the walls kept any reassuring household noises from penetrating. I was shut in with the heavy old furniture and the unpleasant high lights and was apparently as inanimate as they. A slow chill began at the base of my spine and crept disquietingly up to my hair. I resolutely turned my eyes out the window lest I develop those "nerves" which so roused Miss Haldayne's ire.

The sand had drifted high against the house on this side and was a bare six feet below the window. From there it billowed away as far as the eye could reach, a tawny ocean, petrified as it was about to break into waves.

Hidden in the curtains, I kept my eyes fastened on the waste until the muscles ached and little flashes and swirls of light swam before me.

What was I watching for? What was out there hidden in the dunes, that "something" Miss Haldayne feared? She was no ordinary woman to take fright for a trifle. It must be a very real danger which led to these precautions. I found myself seeking out the likely hiding-places within my view; finding a disquieting number of them,— places for a body to press flat to the hot sand, or squat cautiously with only the head in view.

What was it Joan had said she saw in the secret room? —"something all shiny, like a terrible face"? The words carried a chill with them. Unconsciously the notion persisted until that became the thing for which I was looking, out there in the dunes. I could imagine it staring back at me, something less than human, animated by some diabolic form of life; seeing me plainly despite the shielding shutter and the wire mesh, enjoying with gleeful malice the falseness of my fancied security and chuckling to itself in the concealing bunch-grass.

What could it be, there in the secret room? persisted my brain. Was there some connection between it and this apparently aimless watching? What could Joan have mistaken for "something all shiny, like a terrible face"? Was there in that room something living? — something that Miss Haldayne alone visited?

The crawl up my spine grew to an enormous shiver and in desperation I turned my eyes rigidly on the dunes, striving to keep my mind a blank.

The shadow of the house shortened, the sun crept insidiously up and around. The dunes seemed to gasp under the glare, their black, abrupt reflections becoming less and less as noon approached. In all the landscape there was not a breath; nothing moved; the earth was a prostrate, exhausted thing cooped beneath the brazen bowl of the sky. The soft swish of the ocean did not penetrate here; the dunes brooded in awful, heat-laden stillness.

My back ached from the straight-backed chair, my eyes were growing heavy from staring into the gleaming waste. I found myself slumped forward, my forehead pressed hard against the wooden leaves of the shutter. I had slept. After that I disobeyed Miss Haldayne's orders never to cease watching for a moment, and took a brisk trot about the room. This stalled off sleep for a while and I resumed my seat behind the curtains, determined to see the day through no matter how dreary.

The scene outside was unchanged, save that the sand hummocks had begun to cast slight black shadows on the other side. The heat was unabating; a cloud of gnats danced drowsily just

outside the window. It was the only sign of life in all those miles.

A soft scuffling behind me set my head flying around. Hoang stood there with my luncheon on a tray, his marmoreal face expressing no surprise at my peculiar occupation.

I ate like a sentry on duty, my eyes never deserting the scene straight ahead. When the tray had been removed, and the door closed noiselessly behind Hoang's retreating figure, I settled down to an endless wait again. The room was not so hostile now. The afternoon light had penetrated its gloom with a reflected glory, turning it to a sort of amber dusk. The tilted shutters of the open window threw golden bars on the faded carpet and across one dignified old armchair in which no one had sat for years.

In all that scene my eyes finally chose and focussed upon a great dune several hundred yards away. It was the grandfather of all the dunes, its top ridiculously like a bald head with a straggling tuft of bunch-grass growing where the ear-locks would be. It fell away to a series of lower dunes on the right; around the left of its base was scooped a deep gully which reason told me would be the logical approach of any one toward the house. All was outlined in dazzling light villainously unkind to the eyes. The top began to swim as the day waned; to my tired eyes

bunch-grass, light, sand, and sky gradually ran together in a conglomerate mass speckled with blackness.

I don't know what awoke me. I don't even know if I really slept or only swayed forward as I had done so often before. I found myself cold and rigidly erect in the chair, my eyes directed to the clump of lupine which choked the neck of the gully about the dune's base. The lupines had shaken their purple spikes, and in that still landscape the slight movement had stood out in damning revealment. One tall spray still swayed slightly; it would sway like that if a figure had either wriggled into it or away from the shelter of its branches.

My eyes ached with the intensity with which I sought to penetrate the labyrinth of gloom and black shadows entangled in its foliage. Over me crept a horrible numbness, the ghost of fear when we do not know what it *is* we fear. The swaying of the topmost lupine had stopped now; the whole scene swam in uninterrupted stillness and heat.

Then my nerves jumped painfully again, and the next minute relaxed weakly with relief. All the lupine and bunch-grass in sight was swaying and dancing. A little spray of sand blew loose from the top of the great dune and scattered cloud-like to the gully below. The afternoon

winds had sprung up from the ocean and were hurling themselves inland.

Then close upon the relief I felt stalked doubt. The lupine in the gully had been sheltered; even now, while that on top of the dunes was all a-blow, the shrubs in the low places were motionless. Yet the flowers in the gully had stirred, and had stirred while all in sight was still!

Common sense came forward a trifle wearily with the plausible explanation that the little gully created a draft. I snatched at the idea, in the face of the motionless shrubs that confronted me now, trying to talk away that canker of fear that remained at the back of my mind to irritate it.

No need to get hysterical over every growing bush, I told myself severely. No need to torture Miss Haldayne with ghosts of my own manufacture. It must have been the wind. To-morrow I would steal over to the little gully; I would investigate, to lay the ridiculous fear that persisted. If there had been any one under the lupines the trodden sand would prove it.

But that resolve served to keep me alert all the afternoon. Not until gray dusk closed coldly over the scene, rendering vision uncertain, and the sad fog wraiths drifted thinly between the lonely hummocks of sand did Miss Haldayne come to end my long vigil.

Her face was a blot of white against the dusk of the room. I could not read her expression. Her voice was as controlled as ever.

"Thank you, Ann," she said, almost gently; "you will be glad to go, I suppose. You must be tired to death."

At the door she paused and her voice was a trifle apologetic. "Don't say anything about this to my sister or the children. They think you were lying down in your room. I told 'em you did n't feel well."

I assented of course, while my mind was struggling as to whether or not I should tell of the shaking lupine. It was on the tip of my tongue, when, obeying some curious impulse, I crowded it back again. Time enough for that when I had investigated the gully for myself. I had no desire to acknowledge that I had taken fright at the wind,— nor that I had fallen asleep at my post.

It might have been the weary note in her voice, or the sense of conspiracy which bound us together, but for the first time I threw away my customary caution in speaking to the woman before me and allowed my impulse to mature in words.

"Miss Haldayne," I almost gulped in my excitement, "I don't want you to think I 'm a 'busy' person, and of course if you don't want to

tell me I don't mind, but is there anything I can do to help you? I — I 've never betrayed a confidence."

She hesitated, there in the gloom, and her voice came deeper, the nearest to a caress Eliza Haldayne seemed able to come.

"You 're a nice girl, Ann Belmont." That was all, but she still stood motionless. I remained where I was, scarcely breathing, my eyes turned on the white patch which was her face.

I realize now that it must have meant a tremendous struggle for this self-reliant, austere woman to break the habit of a lifetime; but it was a silent struggle, its presence showing only in her indecision. When she did speak it was to have the words drag reluctantly from her.

"Maybe it would be best; it 's getting beyond me. It 's beginning to frazzle my nerves, I 'll admit."

Again a silence, which I did not seek to break; then suddenly, as one who feared she might weaken, she said abruptly: "Come on up to my room. Maybe you can help."

Miss Haldayne's room was as severely practical and neat as that of a New England spinster. From the circular blue-and-gray rag carpet on the floor to the sparkling chimney on the enamel-based kerosene lamp standing primly in the center of a crocheted doily on a small marble-topped

table at the bed's head, there was not an article in it which was not absolutely homely and useful. One thing alone struck an incongruous note. Where one looked to see fresh, severely starched scrim curtains to bear out the clean severity of the rest of the room, thick velvet hangings met the eye, their faded red a discord in this austere spotlessness. Through those folds no gleam of light could penetrate at night, to mark the house to a watcher on the dunes. It sounded again the note of tense caution which I sensed over the rest of the place and I turned to Miss Haldayne with visible relief in finding some tangible footing at last in this sea of vagueness.

She had grimly unlocked an old-fashioned writing-desk standing between the windows and taking a paper from one of the pigeonholes she crossed to me.

After the slightest hesitation, as though already regretting her decision, she thrust it at me. "Read that!" curtly.

Handwriting straggled across the paper — large, ill-formed characters, almost childishly penciled:

You're a fool to think you can hide. If not to-day, to-morrow. But sometime they'll come as surely as day breaks because —

The uneven letters dribbled off the paper, either because they ran to the edge, or because the writer was alarmed and dared not stop to finish.

I read them twice, and again the slow chill began at the base of my spine because of the vague threat hid in the words. Then I raised my eyes to Miss Haldayne's face.

She was watching me closely, almost desperate, like one who grasps at a straw of comfort.

"I found that lying on my desk when I woke this morning."

"What does it mean?"

For a moment her lips tightened, then: "I don't know." And I knew she lied.

"But I don't understand —"

"Neither do I," replied Eliza Haldayne, irascibly. Talking about it appeared to ease the strain a trifle. "Once before it happened. I have a sort of premonition of it. All the day before I 'm particularly stirred up and nervous."

The confession from the usually stoical woman, the very admission that her rigid body held nerves, I recognized as a sign of the intense strain she was under.

"Tell me about it," I said soothingly.

"There 's nothing to tell, I told you." She took out some of the tension on me. "I got up this morning and saw my desk open. I never

leave my things untidy like that. That was the way I found the other note."

"What did the other one say?"

In answer she turned and took a piece of paper from a second pigeonhole. It was in the same rambling writing; contained the same veiled threat:

> How long do you think you can keep it up? — burying your head in the sand like an ostrich. There's always a day of reckoning and when they come —

then an undecipherable word trailing off the paper as it had upon the other note.

I looked up, more at sea than ever. "And you have n't any idea who wrote it?"

"Who could write it?" Miss Haldayne was frankly impatient. "For Heaven's sake, Ann, I thought you might help instead of asking foolish questions!"

This was not undeserved and I took it meekly, studying the notes again. There was a vagueness about them which suggested the rambling taunts of a child or the irresponsibility of a demented person. I checked a shiver and turned the paper over. The other side was blank.

"Have you ever seen paper like this before?" I asked.

"Of course; it 's my own. The kind I keep in my desk all the time. Somebody gets in and

writes it in this room while I 'm asleep. That 's just it; how do they do it? The writing-desk is locked, when I go to bed. How do they get in, in the first place? There is n't a window in the whole place that can be entered. I went over 'em all to-day. The mesh is undisturbed and the shutters lock from the inside. The first time, I thought they might have gotten in that way, so I put the mesh up. Doors are out of the question; every one 's locked at night and in the evening the whole house is lit and I go over it. They could n't get in and hide. Hoang looks, too, before he blows the lamps out, before he comes upstairs."

This failed to reassure me. Knowing her prejudice in Hoang's favor, I spoke hesitatingly: "You don't suppose he —"

My unspoken suspicion was met with the disdain I had expected. "Ann, don't be absurd. Why should Hoang write anything so ridiculous?"

"Why should any one?" I answered stoutly.

I had her there, in the face of her denial as to the note's meaning. For a moment we stared blankly at each other. The grayness of Miss Haldayne's face had not faded, though she was making a desperate effort to remain noncommittal. I was fighting a desire to glance nervously over my shoulder in the dusk. "They" sug-

gested a collection of enemies and we were only two women in a great lonely house.

"I don't know what the notes mean"— she stuck to her lie bravely, though her lips were blue and taut —"but that is n't what 's bothering me, Ann; it 's — *how do they get in?*" This last was a whisper of anguish.

I looked about at the walls, with some wild idea about sliding panels and secret rooms. The walls, however, were like those in the rest of the rooms, smooth white plaster. There were two long windows, narrow and shuttered. The upper veranda did not extend along this side of the house and there was a thirty-foot drop to the dismal garden below. Even assuming one could enter the bedroom, how could he enter the house to begin with, strictly guarded as it was?

Miss Haldayne was speaking still in that low, tense voice:

"That childish handwriting is affected, of course. The language is n't childish; no child could think up and carry out a thing like that. Besides, the children don't know —" she checked herself abruptly, as though realizing that she had said too much.

"Hoang —" I was beginning, unable to shake off my distrust of the Chinaman.

"Ann, for Heaven's sake leave Hoang alone, will you? I tell you he did n't!"

"Well, that only leaves Miss Drusilla and me," I said, exasperated. "You know I did n't. Do you think your sister did?"

I trembled inwardly at this unlucky speech when I recalled the dislike which existed between the two women, but Miss Haldayne disposed of it characteristically: "Drusilla? No; Drusilla has n't brains enough!" she said with unflattering frankness.

A horrible suspicion had flashed into my mind. Were these all the inmates of the house? Suppose that room at the bottom of the staircase held something living; something which crawled up here in the dead of night while we lay sleeping and opened the door with devilish cleverness — "something all shiny, like a terrible face." I shivered and plunged into unwise speech.

"If there was anything in the house — *anything* — that felt spite and took this way to annoy you —" I felt that she must surely get my drift and fall upon the possible explanation. But Miss Haldayne's face was frankly puzzled as I faltered.

"Ann, what in the world are you driving at? Do you think disembodied spirits are hanging around to play tricks? No, sir," she answered herself grimly. "Who ever wrote that is human, though they may be pure devil inside. But how in the world do they get in?"

I thought of all the mystery stories I had read, and ventured the next in a rather shamefaced manner: "You 're sure there 's no underground tunnel or anything like that?"

The idea excited no ridicule. For a moment she studied it gravely, then picked up the lamp and turned to the door. "Come on," she said grimly. "I never thought of that."

Luckily we met no one on the stairs or they would have been amazed to see the supposedly-sick me, trailing Miss Haldayne with a lighted lamp in her hand through the bright hall. As usual, when twilight fell Hoang had lit the numerous lamps and now each blazed on its little individual shelf surrounded by its own golden radiance.

The Chinaman was washing dishes in the warm, bright kitchen as we passed through. Again, as I looked at him, those unreasoning suspicions crowded my brain. Miss Haldayne, on the contrary, spoke to him with unusual gentleness, as though in defiance of my unspoken thoughts.

From one corner of the large kitchen a flight of rough wooden steps led to the cellar below. This was cement-walled and floored; stoutly made, to withstand the drifting sand outside, Our heels rang uncomfortably loud on the hard floor and the shadows danced before us as we

moved with our lamps — I had obtained one in the kitchen.

We searched the enormous basement from one end to the other, holding our lamps high to examine the walls in their entirety, our silhouettes bobbing about with our movements. There was not the slightest thing on which to hang suspicion, not even though we tugged away boxes and barrels stored in one corner, and got ourselves hot and dusty moving potato-sacks.

As we came up the wooden stairs again and blew out the lamps on gaining the top I could not resist speaking. "You 're perfectly sure there 's no one else in the house besides Miss Drusilla and the children and Hoang?"

"Of course," returned Miss Haldayne, irritably. "Why do you harp on that string so much, Ann?"

There was nothing I could say to this without revealing too keen an interest in that room at the foot of the stairs, so I kept still.

"No,"— Miss Haldayne paused on her way up to her room again —"there 's no two ways about it. Some one got into the house — the good Lord knows how! — and wrote that."

A spasm of fright seemed to descend upon her at the thought of her bedroom being silently entered in the middle of the night and an involuntary shiver shook me.

"I got it into my head that those words they used —'If not to-day, to-morrow —' meant that they — that something or other might try to get into the place to-day. That 's why I had you watch, Ann."

She was silent for a moment, her eyes fixed on something I could n't see, her thoughts far away. A gray weariness had fallen on her face, a dread which was wearing her out. I felt a gush of pity for the lonely woman; and as if she sensed it, she withdrew her gaze until it rested on my face and her tone was so kind as to startle me:

"Run along now and get some supper. You look all tuckered out. You 're a good girl, Ann." Her hand shoved me gently and kindly toward the stairs. "Go get some rest."

CHAPTER V

WHAT THE SAND REVEALED

THE next morning a slight restraint appeared in Miss Haldayne's manner toward me. Already she regretted her confidence, I could read in her averted glance; and, catching my clue from this, I returned her brief nod with the briefest of "Good mornings" and gave my entire attention to the two children. Apparently no third mysterious note had been left and Eliza Haldayne once more felt capable of handling the situation alone.

Immediately after breakfast, as though fearful that I might refer to the happenings of yesterday, she slipped into the kitchen while Miss Drusilla's ample figure still blocked the entrance; but one quick glance over my shoulder as I started with Joan and Harry on the morning walk revealed the now familiar bulge in the velvet hangings of the bay-window and I knew that the odd woman was keeping her lonely vigil over us.

The children's chatter spattered off me like so many rain-drops this morning. My thoughts, as

well as my eyes, ever recurred in dread to the great bald-headed dune toward the east where yesterday the lupine had moved. I set the children wild with delight by allowing them to wade in the shallow margin of the little bay, while I sat atop a high dune near them, guardian of two small pairs of shoes and stockings. The sun had broken through the fog early that morning; before me a sea of ultramarine and silver flashed and danced unbroken to the Orient. The bare, ugly beach was becomingly hidden by its shining ripples; hidden, too, were the murderous-looking ropes of kelp. The little creek which meandered through the sand, almost sinking into it before reaching the water, was a thin trickle of silver. Swooping sea-gulls and the two laughing children playing tag with the waves removed the brooding loneliness which generally hung sinisterly over the dreary little inlet.

But my eyes would ever turn to the gully on the east and to the menacing growth of lupine which choked it. From here I could trace it back; a perfect passageway between the great dune and its shorter neighbor; an alley down which a man could wriggle his length unseen from the house he watched. But, however I strained my eyes through the bright morning light, I could discern no movement in the bushes to-day.

Not until the middle of the afternoon was I able to carry out the resolve I had made the day before. I had picked my time well, I silently congratulated myself, as I walked with forced leisure down the shadowy upper hall. Unmistakable noises from behind Miss Drusilla's door bore witness to her slumbers. Miss Haldayne I had seen descend the stairs kitchenward a few minutes before. The children's treble voices floated in through the opened French window, pleasantly intermingled with the roar of the ocean.

At the top of the stairs I suddenly hesitated, overcome by a new impulse. There was a moment of silent struggle, then I was speeding up the hall again and down the stairs at the opposite end, the stairs which led down to Joan's mysterious "Bluebeard Chamber."

At the landing in the bend I checked myself and remained peering with big eyes down into the gloom below. There was nothing very terrifying about the closed door, viewed dispassionately. The tall, thin window beside me gave a vista of wind-swept, sun-flooded sand-dunes billowing away to the horizon. My imagination, however, painted Joan's fearful little figure hiding behind the faded red curtains, her round brown eyes fastened on the door in the shadows below me. From the angle of the stairs here it

would be perfectly possible to obtain a slanting view into the room if the door were open. The thought that "*something*"—"all shiny, like a terrible face"—might even now be staring straight toward me, its baleful gaze stopped only by an inch or two of wood, sent a cold chill down my back.

A stealthy noise behind me wheeled me about, all nerves. The light from the window slanted harshly across the still figure of Hoang, standing there watching me, Heaven alone knows how long. A blind panic descended upon me at the unexpectedness of it; my dislike rasped in my voice when I was able to speak:

"What do you want? Why did you sneak up on me like that?"

He bobbed his head, his long black eyes inscrutable. His tone was as bland as ever.

"Missy Haldayne sen me linen-closet. Fetchem new towels for kitchen."

"The linen-closet is nearer the other stairs than these!" I answered hotly. "Why did you come down this way?"

"Missy Haldayne say fetchem towels." His impassive stare displayed not the slightest embarrassment at the way I had trapped him. It was as though a curtain had been drawn close beneath the surface of those narrow eyes, and of

the curious emotions swarming within I could only guess.

A sense of the maddening futility of my indignation surged over me. I forced myself to turn my back and continue dignifiedly down the stairs as though that had been my intention all along. Behind me came the soft pitter-patter of Hoang's slippers as he followed me, sending little shivers of dislike chasing themselves up and down my spine.

The salt wind was grateful to my hot face as I struck off across the dunes. An anxious glance over my shoulder revealed no watcher from the house; apparently I had not been seen to leave. Hoang had left me before I reached the front door.

I kept to the water along the frequented ground, nevertheless, branching inland only when I reached the farther side of the great dune where I had sat that morning.

It was comparatively easy for me to keep out of sight of the house by working my way from swale to swale until I was well within the forbidden territory which Miss Haldayne had watched so assiduously from the bay-window.

It was very hot in the deep gully around the great dune. The sand here had formed a crust which broke under my feet with little crackling

noises. Toward the right the ground sloped away more levelly and the house towered abruptly.

Some words of Tennyson drifted idly into my head at the sight of it and I repeated them whimsically under my breath as I cautiously followed up the little gully:

> "With one black shadow at its feet,
> The house through all the level shines,
> Close latticed to the brooding heat
> And silent in its dusty vines."

I became abruptly still, while a curious, cold dismay crept up from my heart. My eyes had not played tricks on me yesterday. The sand beneath the lupines was scuffed as though a body had pressed there, and simultaneously I became aware of a pair of eyes watching me through the shelter of another group perhaps twenty-five feet farther up the gully — unwinking, Chinese eyes.

After that first second of breathless horror, my mind gripped suddenly and became cool. I had not betrayed myself by any outward start,— of this I felt sure. I forced my shrinking figure to turn with elaborate carelessness and I pulled a lupine from its dry twig with hands whose shaking was mercifully hidden from those watching eyes.

Instinctively I seized what seemed the only

course to follow. It was apparent that the silent watcher believed himself unobserved and I forced myself to act upon that belief; to appear taking a casual stroll while I stealthily worked my way back to the house.

I could feel that my face had gone white and cold, but my back remained stiff as I deliberately turned it on that hidden figure and sauntered back down the gully, every now and then pausing to tear a lupine from the bushes lining the side, quite as though red-hot tingles were not chasing themselves up and down my spine. I was called to fight the almost overwhelming urge to throw discretion to the winds and race madly for the house looming so temptingly near. More than once my strained imagination caught at the little trifling noises of the dunes — the rustle of wind through the bunch-grass, the whisper among the dried twigs of the lupine, or the almost imperceptible passage of a gopher over the crust of the ground — and twisted them into the lurking footfalls of that silent watcher, risen from his bed of sand and silently pursuing me down the gully.

The thought brought such a weight of terror to drag upon my steps that I deliberately dropped a flower as an excuse to turn around. Only the lupines swaying in the wind and the sun-flooded sand-dunes met my eyes; a quick flash before my

lashes swept down showed no pursuing figure. That silent form was still prostrate behind the whispering shrubs; the slanting eyes, I made never a doubt, still clamped to my loitering figure.

My courage had nearly dwindled when I mounted the shallow wooden steps of the house; my body was benumbed, every nerve strained to hold myself down to a walk. It required all my strength to turn the handle of the door. I slipped into the shadowy hall and shot the bolt after me, then my knees turned to water and I slumped dizzily on the lowest step, sitting there lackadaisically like *Ophelia,* the purple flowers drooping from my nerveless hand.

A hot flash of fear pricked my tortured nerves from their lethargy the next minute. In the half-opened door of the front parlor Hoang suddenly appeared.

There was something which spoke of a smoldering excitement beneath the Chinaman's usually calm exterior. It fairly hissed through his words as he nearly pounced on me.

"Missy Belmont, you see — something? Out there on dunes? You see something?"

The staccato words roused a frightened indignation in me. I knew, now, as well as though I had actually watched him, that Hoang had been peering behind those front red curtains while I

made my painful way back to the house. Was there some bond between this too-plausible Oriental and that narrow-eyed watcher in the sand? How otherwise would Hoang guess that I might have seen something? My attitude could be mistaken for weariness; my expression, I was certain, had remained under control. His words revealed guilty knowledge. He feared that his accomplice had been discovered; this I read into his unwonted agitation.

Oddly enough, this strengthened my anger and lessened my fright. I fixed my eyes upon him and replied severely: "I don't know what you mean, Hoang. Did I see what? What is there to be seen on the dunes?"

He seemed to realize his mistake. The blank curtains were drawn over his black eyes again and the light, slanting through the narrow red panels of glass on each side of the front door, showed his neck muscles stiffen as though he got them under control.

"I think you seem —'flaid. You walk quick; bleathe fast," he fended.

The thought that those two pairs of spying eyes had watched my defenseless figure sent a cold shiver down me again, but I answered boldly enough: "I 'm afraid of nothing, Hoang; do you hear that? *I 'm afraid of nothing!*"

I had risen and was staring fiercely at him as

I flung out this defiance, my chin raised, all my dislike for him allowed to show frankly in my face.

His own gaze dropped — guiltily, I thought. "Missy Belmont, you velly blave lady," and I seemed to detect a note of mockery running through the simple remark.

I left him standing in the hall as I mounted the stairs to my own room, the slanting light from the door panels picking his figure out like a faint red ghost amid the surrounding shadows. In my own room I dropped the lupines on the bed, noticing how my feverish clutch on their stems had stained my hands. My heart was beating like a trip-hammer. I forced myself to wash my face deliberately, in cold water, and rearrange my wind-blown hair; then with a regained calm, outwardly at least, I sought Miss Haldayne.

I had not far to seek. As I stepped through the doorway I saw her capable figure swooping up the hall toward the linen-closet, her arms piled high with Joan's little dresses and Harry's shirts, still warm from the ironing-board. She was droning her little unmusical tune, a sign that the world was turning well with her. She wheeled as I called her name, the dreary little tune dying on her lips; a slight frown of annoyance appearing between her level black brows.

It was apparent that I still reminded her unpleasantly of her regretted confidence.

"Well, Ann?" Her tone was frankly impatient. "Good lands! you look peaked to-day! A person 'd think you 'd seen a ghost."

"I have n't seen a ghost, Miss Haldayne," I replied, in what I was relieved to find was a quiet, steady tone. "I 've seen something very much alive, up there in the sand-dunes."

For a moment the dark blood gushed into her face, then seeped slowly away, leaving a grayish tinge in its wake. She stood rigid, her fierce black eyes burning into mine.

"What do you mean? Speak plain," she finally rasped out.

"Yesterday, while I was watching, I saw the lupines move, over toward the great dune at the east of the house. I did n't say anything to you, for I thought it was only the wind. Then I got to thinking it over and I was n't satisfied. I decided to see for myself. I went there this afternoon. There was some scuffed-up sand, as though somebody 'd crawled on all fours under the shrubs; and not only that, but while I was looking I felt some one's eyes upon me. Then I saw a Chinaman's face, half hidden in the lupine and bunch-grass farther up the gully."

"Go on!" I should never have recognized the hoarse tones.

"I was sure he did n't know I 'd seen him, so I pretended that I was only gathering lupines and I worked my way back to the house. That 's all."

There was a strained silence for perhaps half a minute; then a visible pulling together of the woman before me, and I was hurt and vastly astonished to hear her loud laugh of scorn.

"Ann, you 're developing nerves! You probably saw a stone or something, and took it for a face. Or tramps. You know I told you to keep away from those sand-dunes. You might have wakened a tramp from his afternoon nap."

"A Chinese tramp!" I said quietly.

"Why not?" She came back at me belligerently. "Besides, chances are he was n't Chinese — if you did see any one, and I 'm not admitting you did."

I did not grow angry. There was something pitiful in her brave attempt at poise.

"I 'm sure of it, Miss Haldayne," I said gently. "And the man was Chinese. When I returned to the house I saw Hoang in the hall. He had been watching me from the parlor window. It would be easy for him to be in touch with the Chinaman in the dunes. Oh, Miss Haldayne, Hoang's at the bottom of whatever 's worrying you, I 'm sure of it! I don't trust him for a minute!"

"For Heaven's sake, Ann!" and this time her tone was frankly impatient. "Don't harp on that string any more! To listen to you, a person 'd think poor Hoang ought to be hung. You saw a tramp in the dunes, if you saw anybody." She suddenly switched. "There 's Harry crying. He 's probably fallen and bumped that sore place on his forehead again. Run along, Ann, and see what ails him, will you?"

Hurt and angry, I turned away and walked down the hall to the upper veranda overlooking the ocean. Just as I reached an angle of the wall I glanced involuntarily back.

Miss Haldayne was standing rigid, as I had left her, her face stamped with gray fear, while clean clothes, fallen from the stack in her arms, lay unheeded on the floor about her.

CHAPTER VI

THE HOWL IN THE NIGHT

THAT night, at the supper-table, Miss Drusilla was unusually loquacious, insisting on telling in detail of a house-party she had attended some twenty years before, where, it appeared to my rather spasmodic attention, a Polish prince and an army officer had proposed to her and two scions of our very best families had come to blows over the favor of a dance. We received the details of her dress down to the last stitch; what this one had said and that one had thought, and just how cattily the other one had acted. Encouraged by the preoccupation of her usual dragon, she grew expansive and droned throughout the courses like Tennyson's brook.

The children too were full of animal spirits to-night; fortunately, for Miss Haldayne and I sat there like specters at the feast. Each time Hoang passed behind my chair I involuntarily shrunk within myself,— how noticeably, I did not realize until I caught Miss Haldayne's black eyes fixed on me in frank impatience. My dis-

trust of the servant was becoming a veritable obsession with me, and I sensed that Hoang somehow felt this and that in his peculiar way he resented it, though his manner remained as impenetrable as ever while he served me.

The lamps had been lighted early that night, I noticed, as I accompanied the children upstairs after dinner. Though it was still gray twilight outside, they were all blazing on their myriad little shelves, thrusting the farthest corners into yellow relief and painting our mammoth black shadows on the plastered walls as we toiled up the narrow staircase. Miss Haldayne's queer dread of the dark had illuminated the entire place to-night. From the top of the staircase the upper hall stretched away reassuringly empty to the duplicate steps of the other end, where they plunged down to mellow gloom. To my morbid fancy the curtains seemed drawn together with greater care this evening; not the slightest flicker of yellow light could betray an opening to that silent watcher on the dark dunes.

The evening play hour broke in on my abstraction, luckily, for my nerves were growing ragged. Since the inauguration of the romps on the sand, and the relief of having a companion to whom they could speak their fearful little minds, the children had learned to play like normal imps. It was impossible to review real fears while fol-

lowing Joan's long legs as we flew from two hundred imaginary savages gallantly headed by Harry on a rocking horse. Not until each was tucked in their little cot, Joan's dark head resting uneasily on rag knobs (for she had coaxed me into making "rag curls"), not until I had received two moist kisses in good night and had blown out their light, did that ever recurring dread swoop down upon my cowering mind once more.

I had just shut the children's door behind me, preparatory to stepping into my own room, when I saw Miss Haldayne coming up the hall. She seemed barely to see me as she passed; her "good night" was perfunctory, her black eyes were abstracted. She carried an old tin lantern, one I had never before seen, and disappeared with it into the lighted cavern of her own room as I entered mine.

After making myself ready for bed, I stood in the dark, my face close to the wire mesh of the open window. The night wind blew softly cool about me; I could hear its faint stir as it swept over the unseen sand-dunes below. There was no moon and the stars were blotted out by a high fog. The complaining murmur of the sea came out of hollow blackness which seemed to encompass the silent house in the center of a new and lonely world. I turned my face in the direction

of the big dune, my fancy fearfully picturing the narrow-eyed watcher creeping closer in the cloaking darkness. I shivered; then, Scotch common sense overcoming Irish imagination, I trotted over to the big bed, ascertaining first that I had locked the door.

As I snuggled down between the cold sheets I attempted to concentrate on the happenings of the last two days. This was the quiet reflection to which I had been looking forward since dinner-time. Was there any connection between that silent watcher in the dunes and the mysterious notes? If there was, how had the writer entered the house always lighted and guarded so carefully? What had Hoang to do with it? What had his agitation as I entered meant? Miss Drusilla liked him as little as I did; the children were afraid of his unsmiling silence; yet Miss Haldayne so vehemently asserted his innocence. Hoang; the silent watcher; the threatening notes, and the secret room,— what were their sinister connection with one another?

I thought I was studying it with cool deliberation, when sleep overtook me. I was imprisoned beneath a vast net, a net which to my dreaming fancy brushed the stars and crowded the horizon, yet which entangled by struggling footsteps as I endeavored to escape. I was struggling frantically, blindly; its dark mesh was over my face,

over my whole body, my skin crawled with the feel of it, disgustingly like the soft cling of cobwebs. I was plucking it, loathingly from my face, trying to scream and unable to do more than emit an agonized whisper, when, with a crash which echoed and thundered drearily through what seemed miles of my brain, the sky fell.

I found myself bathed in a cold perspiration and sitting upright; my staring eyes strained through the darkness while the whole house ached with the ring of the noise which had broken my nightmare. For a moment I was held rigid with terror; then, muffled by the plaster wall between, I heard screams of fright from Joan and Harry.

I jumped from my warm bed and ran to the door. The key was not in the lock; my bare foot encountered it on the floor where it had fallen. As I fumbled to find the lock in the darkness I called to the frightened children that I was coming.

Smothered by the two doors, came Harry's frightened and honest wail: "I 'm scared!" but his sobs lessened with the comfort of my voice. My groping fingers found the lock and with a little gasp of relief I thrust the key in, only to turn cold to the ends of my bare toes. My door was locked from the other side.

I think the frightened knowledge of that held me rigid for a full half-minute, afraid to move in the cold darkness. The children's muffled wails redoubled, Joan's tearful treble urging me to "Hurry please!"

My throat was dry and stiff when I finally found my voice. Placing my lips to the crack of the door, where the sound would carry the most easily to the next room, I shouted, the ring of my own voice in my ears setting my heart to throbbing painfully:

"Joan, listen! Something 's happened to the lock of my door. Take Harry and run to Miss Drusilla's room if you 're too frightened to stay alone."

Her tearful voice floated faintly back. "We — can't, Miss Belmont. Our door 's locked too. Oh, I 'm so scared!"

That sent me limp against the damp wall. Both the children and I had been locked in our rooms. Why? By whom?

Between the muffled sobs next door there seemed an ominous silence brooding over the rest of the house. No noise had come from Miss Haldayne's room farther down the hall, nor from Miss Drusilla's, almost directly opposite; yet the sound of the shot — if it had been a shot — could not have failed to awaken them. The key on the other side of my door kept me from seeing

through the keyhole, but the crack at the bottom showed no light lit in the corridor outside.

I was opening my dry lips to call some weak comfort to the sobbing youngsters when the dawning words were smothered in my throat. A high, treble scream — a howl, rather — thin-edged, like the almost unendurable shriek of a violin bow, vibrated through the darkness. Long-drawn, falling, sinking, rising abruptly again: *"Ai-ee! Ai-ee!"* Through its monotonous cadence, more dreadful for its very lack of human expression, I heard the children's muffled sobs stop, silenced by chill terror. My own blood was chilled, I felt my muscles tense; smothered though it was by dark distance and the sheltering door, the sound made the darkness to palpitate about me and become tangible and threatening.

"Ai-ee! Ai-ee!"

My heart choked with the frightened blood which flung itself back on it. *What,* in God's name, was down there in the dark dining-room!

Then, when it seemed that human nerves must snap before the fear of the unknown; that human ear-drums could not stand the shrill terror of it, it stopped — stopped with horrible suddenness, as when a hand falls upon a windpipe, and the ringing silence which rushed in was quite as ominous in its own way.

I felt something wet trickling down my forehead — cold perspiration forced out through terror. I brushed it away automatically, and the movement, slight as it was, broke the tension and I found that I could use my lips.

"Joan, Harry," I called and the words came in a voice I did not recognize. "I 'm here, I 'm close to you. Don't be frightened."

A long smothered sob was my answer. Then Joan's voice piped: "Miss Belmont, what was that?" and Harry's wail broke out: "I want to go to you. I 'm — scared!"

"I 'm here, dear, close against the wall in the cerner by the door." I tried to comfort the terrified child, though I had all I could do to strengthen my lips enough to form the words. "See, we 're almost together; snuggle against the wall on that side. It 's almost as if my arm was around you, is n't it?"

"N-no!" came Harry's honest though muffled roar, but his sister's embrace and the sound of my voice had taken the edge of panic from him. In between my shouted assurances my thoughts were racing madly hither and thither. The stillness below ached like a great void. Where were Miss Haldayne and her sister? Where was Hoang? Who had locked us in? Were we there that we might not interfere or were we prisoners to be attended to later? That was a pistol shot

which had awakened me, but that *howl* — for it had been a howl, that was no spontaneous scream but an eerie wail, one whose cadence was one of intent — what did *that* mean?

World-old fear, foolish fear of the supernatural, flashed back from dead ages to chill me. Morbid readings of my college days leaped to life further to torment my quaking brain. Unconsciously Joan touched the key of understanding.

"Miss Belmont,"— the enforced calm of the little girl's voice told of the strong self-control inherited from her mother's side of the family — "that sounded something like Hoang, did n't it?"

The words were a revelation. With dizzying swiftness my mind flashed back to some literary data I had at one time looked up. Once again I was back in the high-arched ivy-covered university library. Through the amber-glassed casement windows the light slanted mildly over quiet figures bowed over the long tables below. There had been a book, fat and brown-covered; a book of curious customs, curiously worded:

. . . And when the Spirit doth at length leave the Body, then do all present beat their breasts and burst forth into lamentation, loud and exceedingly shrill. A most unpleasant and doleful sound which greatly distresseth the ear. This the Chinese call The Death Howl . . .

The thought left me dumb. Not until Joan's quaver insisted, "Did n't it, Miss Belmont? Did n't it sound like Hoang?" was I able to reply in a shaky voice: "I don't know, Joan. It was too far away."

Still the ominous silence continued, downstairs. I sternly forbade my mind to dwell on what that howl could have meant, lest the thought send me into blind panic. The wrenching and shaking of the knob of my door failed to loosen the key on the other side. I was not strong enough to break it open; nor had I any weapon with which to break one of the stout oak panels through. I could picture the children hunched, shivering in their little night-gowns, against the wall; and, calling to Joan, I told her to tuck Harry into his cot and then to crawl into her own. Standing chilled in the dark was not going to help matters any.

I followed my own advice when I knew that they had obeyed, pulling the warm bedclothes around my shivering body but sitting bolt upright and wide-eyed in the dark. Not a sound filtered to my strained ears. That proved conclusively that Miss Haldayne had knowledge of the strange happenings of this night. If she had been in her room I should have heard her by now. Miss Drusilla too — what share did she

have in this mystery? She disliked Hoang as greatly as she disliked her own sister; surely she could not be in league with them. Yet, directly across the hall from me as her room was, I should surely have heard her voice as easily as the children's. Even assuming that she too was locked in her room, it seemed hardly likely that she would have remained silent unless she had had forewarning of this disturbance. Were both the sisters downstairs at the time of that shot, and — a shiver shook me down to the soles of my bare feet — for whom was the death-howl?

Minute after minute ticked away by my little alarm-clock on the dressing-table, while my thoughts swam in wild confusion. Evidently the warmth of bed had overcome the children's terror, for their silence told of sleep. No sound from the black cavern of downstairs; no sound from the long hall outside my door. Smothering darkness pressed against the wire mesh of the windows as my eyes sought their direction; then I found myself uttering an exclamation of astonishment, while my feet were reaching for the floor.

A pin-prick of light had appeared out there on the dunes, a light closely followed by another. I pressed my face against the cold, wet screen, regardless of the damp air blowing about my thinly

clad body. The lights bobbed unsteadily, now appearing to go out in the blackness, now suddenly reappearing; up and down, up and down, always that same distance apart — lanterns carried by two people climbing over the mounds and swales of sand.

I watched for nearly an hour, huddled in the quilt I had taken from the bed, until they finally winked out. Moment after moment passed and they did not prick out again. The chill finally drove me to my bed.

After the cold and the strain, the warmth of the covers acted as a narcotic. I was puzzled suddenly to find myself with eyes wide-staring at the daylight which filled the room. Through the squares of window showed dense fog instead of sunshine; it was plainly past my usual hour for waking. Memory swooped down on me with a shiver.

I swung to the floor and pattered across the room to the door. The knob turned easily in my hand; while I slept the door had been softly unlocked.

More shaken by that than if I had remained a prisoner, I hastily pulled my clothes on with shaking hands. A quick glance into the children's room — their door, too, was open this morning — showed them sleeping; Joan uneasily, because of the rag knobs. I did not wake them,

but closed the door softly and turned with a wildly beating heart down the hall. What was I to find at the foot of those stairs? Which one of our little household would be missing?

CHAPTER VII

ANN MAKES A DECISION

THE inverse ratio on any strong emotion leaves us bewildered and strangely void of feeling. I do not know what I had expected when I descended the stairs in dread, but certainly it was not to find Miss Haldayne firmly entrenched behind the coffee urn in her usual place; to see Hoang, immaculate and irreproachable as ever in fresh white linen, reaching over to deposit a smoking stack of hot cakes before her, while Miss Drusilla, opposite, placidly emptied the cream-jug into her cup of steaming coffee.

The inverse ratio I have mentioned forbade me even to feel relief for the moment, so great was my amazement. I know that I stood motionless there in the red-curtained doorway, my mouth sagging ludicrously, too utterly astonished to advance to the chair which Hoang, who had first sighted me, had drawn back politely. It was only Miss Haldayne, looking up in frank impa-

tience at my inactivity, that galvanized me into life and advanced me stiffly to my place.

"Oatmeal, Ann?" Miss Haldayne matter-of-factly poised the spoon over an empty mush-bowl.

"Pl-please," I stammered, wondering which was the nightmare, the weird happenings of last night or the placid commonplaces of this morning. Miss Haldayne seemed as usual, when I studied her severe profile while she served me. A little grimmer, perhaps, but certainly not like one who had gone through a soul-racking experience in a lonely house at midnight. Miss Drusilla was not in such perfect poise. She was far less loquacious than usual. After a fluttery "good morning" her eyes again dropped to her coffee-cup, where she was piling sugar after her usual habit. Her hand was trembling, I noticed, and she was more like a timid white rabbit than ever. But this might signify nothing. I had seen her look so when Miss Haldayne, nettled beyond endurance by her sister's gnat stings, had paused to take an extra determined verbal slap at her tormentor. There might have been a passage of words between the sisters just before I entered. That would account for the younger's agitation and for the elder's grimness.

My untasted mush before me, I waited until Hoang's white back had vanished behind the swing-door before I opened my lips to speak.

My words died a-bornin' as my Scotch ancestors would have put it. Miss Haldayne turned to me with a crease of annoyance between her black brows.

"Where 's Joan and Harry? Why can't they get here in time for their breakfast?"

The unexpectedness of this, and its injustice, took my breath away and struck a note of anger when I did speak.

"They 're asleep — worn out, the poor little youngsters, after last night's terrible experience!"

I was not facing her, but I seemed to feel Miss Drusilla's eyes flutter to my indignant profile and rest there in fright. Miss Haldayne's gaze never wavered, but I sensed that her fingers tightened about the handle of her fork.

"Meaning what, Ann?"

The sublime audacity of it almost floored me. "Meaning that we were all awakened by the sound of a shot, followed by a horrible and unearthly howl — in Hoang's voice, Miss Haldayne! That I jumped from my bed and ran to the door —"

Eliza Haldayne interrupted me, apparently with unusual haste: "Surely you are n't going to develop nerves because poor Hoang had a nightmare, Ann! It 's hardly the right example for the children. Joan 's so nervous now

she 's almost jumping out of her skin. I hoped your common sense would curb that instead of encouraging her foolishness."

The supreme impertinence of it choked me. Struggling to remain calm, I was beginning, "Miss Haldayne, you surely don't mean to tell me —" when I interrupted myself. The noiseless Hoang pitter-patted into the room with my portion of hot cakes. Before he left Miss Haldayne folded her napkin and rose, as though seizing the opportunity to escape without explanations. Impetuously I thrust my chair back and followed, regardless of Miss Drusilla's half-formed — and indeed half-heard — exclamation of alarm. In the hall, where the shadows rendered her expression utterly unreadable, I caught up with my employer.

"Miss Haldayne," I burst out, anger burning away the usual restraint I felt with this strange woman, "there 's no use in our playing at cross-purposes like this. Something happened in this house last night, something — dreadful. I was awakened by a shot and a few seconds later came a horrible howl — a Chinese death-howl, Miss Haldayne. I had that explained to me once. I ran to my door. It was locked — from the *outside,* Miss Haldayne — and so was the children's door."

"Nonsense, Ann! What you call a shot was a

shutter blown back against the wall by the wind. I found it so this morning when I came down. I told Hoang to put a new catch on it to-day. And as for all this nonsense about a death-howl — whatever in the world *that* is — that 's out-and-out ridiculous, Ann, and you know it! Hoang had a nightmare and yelled just like a lot of other human beings yell when they 're scared. For Heaven's sake, you 're not going to get hysterical because a servant gets the nightmare! You 'll be seeing ghosts next."

" It was no ghost that locked my door from the other side after I had locked myself in and left the key in the lock," I reminded her, my quiet tone giving little hint of the hot anger raging within.

" You 've confessed yourself that it 's nonsense," she returned. " How could any one get another key in the lock if you left your own there? "

" The key fits very loosely. It could easily be poked out from the other side by a piece of wire or even by another key, for that matter. It had fallen on the floor, I had to grope for it. I could n't get it back into the lock because the second key was still in snugly from the opposite side."

" You did n't try right. You were probably half-asleep and did n't even turn it. Your door

may be sticking again." The impatience fairly rang through Eliza Haldayne's voice.

But I refused to be browbeaten. Irish temper overcame Scotch caution. "I suppose the children imagined that their door was locked, too, when they were frightened and wanted to get out of their room and run to me?" I inquired sarcastically.

She took this gravely. "No, their door was locked. I locked it myself just before I went to bed. Harry's got a habit of walking in his sleep. He caught a bad cold last winter doing that and I did n't want to take any chances with him. Don't go 'round looking for trouble, Ann, and don't let your imagination run away with you."

This flared my resentment to a white-hot flame. My slight body seemed to grow and expand with the volume of my indignation until it equaled in stature the big woman before me.

"My imagination, as you call it, Miss Haldayne, has too much to feed on here. I 'm afraid I 'll have to take it from Dune House before it assumes greater proportions. Hoang might have another nightmare."

My words spattered at her like so much shot. I could not read her expression in the gloom. There was no relaxation of that upright figure, but I somehow gained the impression of bleak

loneliness, like a gaunt rock continually gnawed and lashed by the waves which were wasting it away. Then her voice came and it was a surprisingly tender, sadly gentle voice, such as I had not believed the blunt woman capable of using.

"I 'll be sorry to see you go, Ann, but — I can't blame you." Then she had turned, briskly as always, and whisked herself upstairs to the disarranged bedrooms.

I went slowly up to my own and sat down on the edge of my unmade bed. The first sharp edge of my anger had dulled. In my mind I reviewed the situation. As usual, second thoughts reversed the first. I found, with an element of surprise, that it would be rather a wrench to leave Dune House. Despite the mystery and the unexplained and nerve-racking threat hanging over the place I had been rather contented here. The quiet, the plain wholesome food, the vigorous salt air — all this had changed the pale girl who had come from the city some months before. The reflection in the mirror opposite was almost that of a stranger: smooth tanned cheeks, clear eyes, hair shining with health — for this I had to thank Dune House. I felt a very real affection, too, for Joan and Harry; even, strangely enough, for the eccentric woman who had engaged me. Should I go and leave the trusting youngsters to the menace which overhung the place? leave them

to the mercy of their too-vivid imaginations? rob them of the only companionship their little hearts had ever known? To other ears my story would sound ridiculous and would entangle me in a net of insinuations which I could not prove. I could substantiate nothing. I should be looked upon as a more-or-less harmless idiot if I attempted to have the children put under other control.

At this point a timid knock sounded on the door and Joan's dark head came around it. Her seal-brown eyes were pathetically large in the pale face this morning. Harry was clinging to her, a round-eyed, frightened Harry, distressingly delicate for his six years. At the sight of me their faces lit up, and, suddenly emboldened, they raced to my arms.

"Miss Belmont, what was it last night? Harry says maybe we dreamed it, but we both could n't dream the same thing, could we?"

In the brief moment before I replied my decision was made. Leave Dune House while it held these two pale babies in its grim clutch! Flee from an unknown fear and toss two small hearts behind me into a chasm of loneliness and terror? Ann Belmont could never be such a self-centered wretch!

Both little forms hugged tightly to me, I

reached out easily for Miss Haldayne's ready-made explanation,

"It was Hoang, chickens; he had a nightmare. And that loud noise that woke us all up, that was a shutter banging against the wall."

But inwardly I was promising myself fiercely that two things I would do and at once. I would watch Hoang when he thought himself unobserved, playing detective on my own hook until I could convince Miss Haldayne of his guilt; and I would find out what lay behind the door of that secret room.

In the next few days when things had apparently settled to an unbroken routine of study, play and sleep, I noticed two things which caused my now over-alert brain to note them suspiciously down.

Hoang always wore white now — white, the badge of Chinese mourning! — and as he served us at meal times, I noticed beneath the loose sleeve of his linen blouse a tightly wound bandage, a bandage which appeared to continue up to the elbow as though his arm had been badly wounded. Later, while helping Miss Drusilla sort stockings in a heap for mending, I asked casually: "What has happened to Hoang's arm? I see he 's had it bandaged for the last two days."

My eyes were on the stockings in my lap, but I

felt Miss Drusilla's gaze flutter to my face as it had on the morning following the death-howl. There was a tense silence in the little sitting-room for a minute, broken only by the ticking of the onyx clock on the mantelpiece. I suddenly lifted my eyes.

A curious indecision was battling in Miss Drusilla's spongy face. For the first time I saw a resemblance between the sisters. A devil of spite, and fear too, gleamed from her pale-blue eyes, her lips fairly twitched with the ghosts of words seeking to materialize; then a flutter passed over the fat white face, the air expelled from her lungs in a regretful little wheeze, her eyes plunged by mine to the opened door to the hall. Miss Haldayne was passing briskly along it, her arms full of bedclothes to be aired on the sunny side veranda. In a moment she had flashed by the shaded little room, nor did she turn her head, but her passing was sufficient to prevent Miss Drusilla's confidence. The dominant will had completely overcast the weaker, as a stern sun might pull a refractory planet back to its allotted orbit.

Miss Drusilla became a fluttery white rabbit again, sorting stockings.

"Hoang's arm? Oh, yes. He burned himself on the wash-boiler the other morning. The kitchen 's no place for a man, whether he 's a

white man or a heathen. A good woman cook, that 's what Eliza ought to get, but, there — I don't suppose you could get a woman to stay here. How you 've stayed so long is a mystery to me, Ann,— this gloomy old place. When *I* was a girl — always something lively, but then, if I do say it, I was a mighty pretty girl; of course that is n't what *I* think, but hundreds of young men have said so. There was one — a wonderful young man he was, and quite a catch, and *he* said —" and so, ad infinitum.

I checked it up on my mental records: so, Hoang's arm had been hurt the other night and Miss Drusilla knew how, but was afraid to say. This cleared up my mystery not a whit, but it served to increase my dislike for and distrust of the Chinaman.

I had noticed, too, since that nerve-racking night, a new desperation in Miss Haldayne's eyes. Her manner was as preoccupied, her movements as vigorous and brisk, but her eyes held a strained hopelessness, like one fighting alone, with his back to the wall.

Then one morning I woke to find that she had departed to the nearest town for supplies, leaving early, while we still slept. It was Hoang who gave this information as Miss Drusilla seated herself at the breakfast-table and I loosed myself from the morning embraces of Joan and

Harry. He came into the room silently in his felt slippers and placed the steaming bowl of oatmeal before Miss Drusilla, with the comment: "Missy Haldayne, she go town to get things. She back this afternoon. You want chocolate or milk for chil'en?"

I could see that Miss Drusilla was indignant under her fluttery attempt at calm. Twice before had Miss Haldayne made such a trip since I had come to Dune House, but each time she had told us in advance. Now the uncomfortable thought occurred to me that it would be a simple matter for something to have happened to her while our suspicions were blandly parried by the laconic Chinaman.

That the same fear had occurred to Miss Drusilla was apparent when she next spoke. Hoang left the room and her faded blue eyes followed his enigmatical white back spitefully. Her tone was fretful.

"That 's a funny thing for Eliza to do! Anything might happen to her and we 'd be none the wiser. The Lord knows what might take place in this house, too, while she 's away!"

Joan's sharp little ears pricked up at this. "What things, Aunt Drusilla?" she inquired with a freedom she lacked when her austere guardian was present. "What could happen to us?"

I chimed in quickly, striking at the alert fear which reared its head through the little girl's treble. "Your aunt was speaking figuratively, dear. Lots of times we say things that sound stronger than we mean them. Why, what could happen here!" This last was in a tone which I meant for scornful ridicule, but Joan interpreted it as a serious question.

"There 's the —" She suddenly stopped and smothered her words with a mouthful of mush.

My mind finished the forbidden sentence for her. There was the secret room, indeed; there was the menace which mystery always brings. All morning that thought was with me, rustling the leaves of my imagination; sliding its ugly head over the tops of the school-books as I heard the children's lessons; reminding me of the second part of that resolve I had made. This was a heaven-sent opportunity to explore the secret room; to discover or allay my fears. Miss Haldayne never returned from these expeditions until late in the afternoon. Once the children were set to playing after luncheon I should be free to rummage the house unmolested for three hours at least.

I formed my plans on the morning walk. The high fog had not lifted to-day; the sea and the sky were smoky pearl, like the curved white hollow of an oyster-shell. Even above high-

water mark the sand clung damply to our shoes. The tide was low, the dismal sloping beach strewn with brown kelp, sinuous and shiny, some of it large as a man's wrist and disgustingly snake-like. The fog clung tenaciously to the house, looming wraith-like, like a sulky ghost squatting on the sand, waiting for the next high tide to carry it off to sea.

My eyes fell on the window of the secret room at the right-hand corner, tight-shuttered and forbidden. A ladder placed against the outside of the house and, by standing on tiptoe, one would be on a level with a slat missing in the shutter. Common sense railed at quaking imagination. At least one mystery would be removed; I might obtain some clue which would help to explain the unknown fear hanging over the house.

There was a step-ladder in the unused back parlor, I remembered. Only the day before I had seen Miss Haldayne, skirts capably looped up over a striped flannel petticoat, standing on its top rungs, cleaning the great gilt picture-frames with ammonia and water.

I shortened the children's lessons when I heard Miss Drusilla plodding upstairs for her afternoon nap; and turned them out to play on the upper veranda overlooking the ocean. Then, silent save for a wildly thumping heart, I flew down the shadowy stairs to the back parlor.

The ladder was still there, folded against the wall in a dark corner. Luckily it was not too long for me to manage by myself. Once the end ran into an angle of the wall and I stopped fearfully to listen. Hoang I could hear shuffling about in the kitchen at the end of the corridor. The children's happy voices floated faintly down through the opened French window.

I continued as silently as I could and got the cumbersome thing down the steps without too much scraping, and around to the corner of the house.

More than the fog had penetrated my blood by now and was setting my teeth a-chatter. The ladder's top scraped against the wooden window-sill as I raised it, for all my painstaking efforts. It caused me to hesitate, one foot on the lower rung; half-fearfully expecting to see Joan's "terrible face" pressed fiercely against the missing leaf of the shutter to see what was invading its sanctum. Then, gripping my courage with set teeth, I started to mount.

I suppose my outward ears had heard the squeaking before, but my preoccupation had attached no significance to the sound. Now I became aware of it with a gasp that caused my heart to leap painfully and left me clinging flatly, midway up the ladder, like a limpet on a rock.

Before the house a small delivery truck,—

hired, I guessed, in the nearest little town,— had come to a jolting stop. Its sunburned and frankly curious driver was helping a small Filipino to lower its heavy load to the ground. Rather startlingly this proved to be a swathed figure in a large wheeled chair — a man's figure, one guessed, from the firmly molded features of the pale face visible beneath disfiguring smoked glasses.

Two shabby suit-cases were placed on the ground as well, but at the driver's offer to wheel the chair up the sandy, unkept path to the house, the Filipino emphatically shook his head. Not until the jerky little truck had started to rattle its homeward way across the dunes did he move, then it was to take his place behind the chair and wheel it slowly along, a ludicrously small Sisyphus whose stone threatened to roll back and annihilate him each minute.

CHAPTER VIII

THE PARALYTIC MAN

FOR a moment sheer amazement kept me, a scared little Prometheus guiltily suspended between heaven and earth. The somber procession advanced to the shallow wooden steps, the rhythmic squeak of the chair wheels, ever growing louder, falling on the ear with an indescribably mournful effect. As it halted I heard the front door wheeze back rheumatically on its hinges, saw Miss Drusilla's palpitating bulk fill the entrance, caught a disquieting glimpse of Hoang's white figure in the gloom of the hall beyond.

What a fastastic group we should have appeared could we have been transformed to canvas at that moment! — a weird puzzle-picture whose meaning was somewhere hidden in the incongruous grouping. The wheeled chair with its sad burden and dusky guardian, the frightened, flabby woman in the gaping doorway, the narrow-eyed, inscrutable Chinese in the ghostly gloom behind her, the white-faced girl clinging

limpet-fashion to her ladder; over it all the smoky pearl arch of the sky and the mournful cadence of the sea flinging itself incessantly on wet sands.

The tableau was broken when the Filipino said something intelligible only to the man he wheeled. The figure in the chair did not stir other than to lift an arm and drop it wearily again.

"This is Dune House?" His tone was low and hollow, a voice which seemed by rights to belong to a man much older than he appeared beneath the disguising glasses. "I am looking for my aunts, the Misses Haldayne." The white face turned blindly in the direction he addressed.

I heard a little gasp from Miss Drusilla, audible even at that distance and the face of Hoang appeared to my oblique vision to grow sharper. As if he too had heard the telltale sound, the man in the chair added simply, "I am George Rogers."

Miss Drusilla's perplexity was truly pitiful to see. She looked alternately from the man in the chair to the two battered suit-cases. Her face screwed up with indecision and anxiety, like that of an infant about to burst into tears. "*George Rogers!* I — I — Oh, I don't know *what* to do!"

"You received my telegram?" came the too-

old voice from the chair, a voice which sounded as though all the strength and youth had been sapped from it.

"No!" was forced from Miss Drusilla's lungs. "George Rogers! Whatever will Eliza say!"

She had come out on the porch now, too much agitated to notice my guilty figure, afraid to move from its undignified perch. She stood on the top step, a frail figure somehow, despite the bulk of flesh, her pudgy hands pressed tightly together as though drawing comfort from the impact. "What has happened! Whatever has happened! Why, you were never like this!"

A laugh, dry as a consumptive's cough, hacked from the man. "A trifling memento of the war, Aunt Drusilla — you are Aunt Drusilla, are n't you? So you did n't get my telegram; your voice sounds shocked. To state it baldly, I have wished myself upon you and Aunt Eliza, for the time being at least, until other arrangements can be made. I 've come here to stay because — well, because there is n't another place for me in all of this hospitable world."

The shock of this fetched me half-tumbling to the ground, but Miss Drusilla neither saw nor cared what my occupation had been. If her voice had been shocked before, it was stricken now.

"To stay! Oh, what shall I do! If only

Eliza were here!" Then belated politeness came limping to her aid. "Of course I 'm glad to see you, George, I 'm sure. We 'd be delighted to have you stay here, but, really, we have n't very much room"— this in the face of those empty bedrooms upstairs! "It rests entirely with Eliza. You — you 'll come into the house?" she finished lamely.

The man in the chair laughed dryly again. "That 's what I traveled over three thousand miles to do, Aunt Drusilla. Is there some one who can help Rafael with this confounded chair?"

Silently Hoang came forward and grasped the bottom of the chair. As he did so his eyes fell on me, took in the telltale ladder leaning under the corner window, and the guilty clasp of my hand on its rung. It was only a moment that the angry dislike glittered at me from between the slanting lids, then the eyes were discreetly lowered and he backed slowly up the steps with his burden.

I waited until I saw the stranger wheeled into the house, until Hoang had carried his baggage inside and shut the front door, then I hastily folded the ladder and as noiselessly as possible I carried it on to the porch, my appetite for exploration entirely dissipated, my only desire to avoid further discovery.

As I cautiously introduced my head into the dark hall to see if the coast was clear, I saw that the door of the little sitting-room was closed. From behind it came the indistinct murmur of voices; the dry taut tone of the stranger, Miss Drusilla's panic-stricken wheeze. Nor was this all: a white-clad figure loomed indistinct and ghost-like in the gloom, a figure with head bent close to the crack of the door, that no muffled word might escape the listening ears — the figure of Hoang.

He wheeled, startled at the fall of my footsteps; his slant eyes wider than I had ever seen them, the white linen coat over his chest rising and falling rapidly. It was the first time I had ever had him at a disadvantage and I stared meaningly to cover the awkwardness of my own position.

Hoang recovered with a visible effort. Again the lids dropped obsequiously; his voice inquired meekly, "Missy Belmont, you want me carry ladder in?"

Even through my anger I had to applaud, however reluctantly, his astuteness. He had effectually blocked any reproof by this apparently innocent reference to my own guilt. I grew suddenly reckless. What was the value of any attempt at concealment?

"Yes," I flung over my shoulder in what I

hoped was a cool tone. "Take it to the back parlor."

It was a condition and an acceptance. I felt my face flaming as I continued on up the stairs, that Fate had thus forced me into a truce, however brief, with the obnoxious Chinaman.

I found Joan and Harry, their little stomachs doubled over the banister, trying to hear what was going on downstairs. Joan looked up at me through the meshes of her dark hair, her face scarlet from her inverted exercises.

"Is it Cousin George, Miss Belmont? Aunt Drusilla called him George Rogers, did n't she?"

"What 's a-matter with his legs?" demanded Harry, as I reversed the stout little boots which had been pointing ceilingward rather alarmingly. "Joan said he never usta be like that."

In the school-room, where I felt reasonably sure that Hoang's listening ears could not hear, I demanded, "Who is Cousin George, Joan?"

"I saw him once when Mama was alive," the little girl answered in roundabout childish fashion. "He came to the house. Harry was only a little tiny thing; he don't remember him at all."

Ignoring my murmured "Does n't, Joan," she went on.

"He brought me a doll in a pink dress, but the elastic came out of its legs after a while. He was awful nice. He could walk then and he did n't

have those black things over his eyes. Mama cried when he went away —"

"But who is he?" I reiterated patiently. "Is he a real cousin?"

"I guess so," the little girl replied. "I heard Mama and Papa talk after he 'd gone. His real name 's George Rogers Haldayne; Mama and Papa called him George Rogers all the time, but I called him Cousin George. I 've told Harry about him before. He went way off some place; over the sea, it was, far away. They said where, but I can't remember. That was the only time I ever saw him and he made a cunning little white rabbit with his napkin at dinner for me. I was sorry when he went away. Mama and Papa died after that and we came here to live with Aunt Eliza and Aunt Drusilla."

"What 's a-matter with his legs?" Harry was still demanding vociferously between pauses.

"He 's been to the war," I explained, my mind busy wondering what changes this new addition might make in our queer household.

In the midst of their volley of questions called forth by this, and which I was doing my best to answer, I suddenly broke off and hurried to the window.

The ancient old machine stood on the sandy path below, still quivering with the speed of its return trip through the dunes. Miss Haldayne,

her face an iron mask, was climbing hastily over the side of the car, a full three hours before she had been expected. Just before she disappeared beneath the outjutting floor of the upper veranda I caught a glimpse of something yellow in her hand — the belated telegram to which the stranger had referred.

Regardless of the questionable example I was setting the children, I opened the school-room door a trifle and stood listening. I heard the front door open and close, I heard — or thought I did, at least — the sibilant syllables of Hoang's repressed tones. There was the sudden murmur of three voices, which was as suddenly shut off as the door of the little sitting-room closed behind Miss Haldayne.

Looking back upon it now, it seems rather astonishing how little difference the advent of George Rogers Haldayne made in the daily life of Dune House. A man who is both blind and paralytic naturally cannot take an active part in the affairs of a household. Yet there was attendant none of that turmoil which usually accompanies the care of an invalid. After his startling introduction to us it was as though he did not exist. He was assigned a bedroom at the end of the hall, the end in which was the mysterious staircase. From Miss Haldayne's scant remarks on the subject, and Miss Drusilla's

rambling ones, I gained the impression that he was sensitive about his affliction; that he preferred taking his meals in his own room, attended only by the Filipino servant, who appeared devoted to him, slipping about the house as silently as a shadow and that only when it was absolutely necessary. George Rogers Haldayne was a dead-alive man, craving only the boon of being left alone, to forget and be forgotten by the world which had maimed him.

From Miss Drusilla I learned one day, while we polished the silverware together, that his pension was all he had left in the world and upon the collapse of his ambitions and dreams he had turned to the only relatives he possessed.

Even flabby Miss Drusilla seemed overcome by genuine feeling as she unreeled his sad history. Her polishing-cloth poised over an old-fashioned pointed spoon which had surely crossed the continent in a prairie schooner or braved the blizzards of the Horn, her faded eyes holding a far-off look, she spoke:

"No one would ever have thought of such an end for George Rogers — we always called him that, an old New England custom, I guess. There 's always been a George Rogers in the family, after George Rogers Clark, who was a friend of the Revolutionary Haldayne. This George Rogers's father was George Rogers before him —

George Rogers, our elder brother. Then comes Eliza, then me; then, fifteen years younger than me, was Florence, Joan and Harry's mother. Florence was the youngest of the family. He stayed with us one summer when he was just a boy, and he took a great fancy to Florence, though of course she was older than he was. We only saw him that once, for he went to Manila with some of his mother's family right after. That was just after his father died. He was in this country once after that. Eliza and I did n't see him, but he went to see Florence. Joan was a little thing then and Harry was just a baby. He was over here on business and he went right back again. He says he was doing right well in Manila when the war broke out. He 'd served under Pershing in the islands, so when Pershing was made commander-in-chief he enlisted and went to France — in the aviation. The Germans crippled his machine one day; luckily he was over his own lines, so he was n't taken prisoner, but the fall paralyzed his legs and the shock affected the optic nerve. He can only see the slightest haze, that 's why he wears the glasses, so 's not to strain his eyes by daylight."

"Oh, the poor fellow!" was wrung out of me.

Miss Drusilla continued with the morbid satisfaction some women take in recounting misfortune, her flabby face plastered in lines of direst

woe, her head nodding solemnly at me over the jumble of silverware on the red table-cloth between us: "He has no other people besides us; that 's how he happened to come here. Got our address from our lawyer in San Francisco. Eliza never got the telegram until too late, or she 'd 'f put him off somehow, but when he came and she saw him helpless like a baby she had no other choice. Eliza 's strong on doing her duty."

This last caused me to lift my head sharply. What might have been a compliment was uttered as a sneer and under it smoldered some long-buried but secretly nourished resentment.

This pitiful story of his, added to his helplessness, quickened my sympathy for the invalid. The afternoon following my conversation with Miss Drusilla I paused by the opened French window upstairs and looked out on the ocean-side veranda.

It was the children's play-time. They had brought their toys, Joan lugging June, the beloved doll as large as herself, and had ensconced themselves in a sunny angle of the porch. Here, too, had come the invalid, his blanketed legs extended helplessly on the chair before him, trundled there, for an airing, by the silent Filipino. His head was bare, the ocean wind stirring the light-brown hair. There was something pathetic about that blowing hair when one con-

trasted it with the still limbs and disfiguring dark glasses. But this thought did not occur until later. Now, I saw with a little glow of satisfaction that he was deep in conversation with Joan, who sat demurely in a small rocker beside him while his thin white hand stroked the little girl's silky dark hair. Even as I looked his white teeth showed at some quaint expression of hers — the first time I had seen him smile since his mournful advent into Dune House.

I went forward with some half-formed idea of joining them. At the sound of my footsteps both conversationalists turned toward me, Joan's brown eyes glistening with delight, the black glasses of the man pathetically strained in my direction.

"It 's Miss Belmont, goody!" Joan dropped the doll unceremoniously on its back and skipped to meet me. "Cousin George is telling me about the Filipinos and about the funny little brown babies and the bamboo houses built up on poles. You sit down and listen, Miss Belmont, it 's awfully inter-*rest*ing."

"I 'd love to," I was saying with real cordiality, when I was checked by the bleakness which overspread the man's unsmiling mouth. His voice became constrained, his head turned slightly from me.

"I 'm afraid Miss Belmont would n't care for

my line of talk, Joan. Those things just interest you and me."

"Oh, no!" I took his constraint for embarrassment. "I 'm as eager as Joan. Please go on, Mr. Haldayne. I 'll promise to be a most appreciative audience."

I was extending the palm-leaf of understanding sympathy, and extending it, I flattered myself, in a sincere and inoffensive manner, but I was amazed at the unmistakable coldness of his reply. His face was averted even more, the mouth compressed as determinedly as Miss Haldayne's could have done.

"I beg your pardon, you are very kind"— and oh the bleakness of the words!—"but I 'm sure you'll excuse me when I say I 'm getting tired. Talking is wearisome."

There was a quality in the tone which I could only interpret as frank dislike. For the moment amazement kept me sitting in the chair Joan had placed for me, ridiculously cradling the big doll in my lap. I was at a loss to account for this treatment. True, I was no bewildering beauty; men had never risked life and limb to gain my favor as in Miss Drusilla's ever-green memories, but neither had they shown the unmistakable repulsion I read into the reply I had just received from this blind man. I could generally amuse and interest them; like Miss Drusilla, I could

remember dances where I was no wall-flower — college dances just passed — but this coldness — it was really an insult.

Smarting with hurt pride, I arose and replaced the big doll in Joan's arms. "Of course if you are weary I would not dream of insisting, Mr. Haldayne," I said quietly, relieved to find that my voice did not quiver. "I thought that you might care for some adult company. I am sorry."

I moved away, fiercely combating a feminine impulse to cry. Not until I was stepping through the long window did I look back.

Over the top of the high-backed chair I could see the light-brown hair blowing; Joan was once more ensconced in her little rocker, apparently deeply immersed in the continued conversation.

Even had I been less deeply hurt at this return to my well-meant advances, the manner of the paralytic man toward me would have kept me at my distance. To his aunts, when he could not avoid speaking to them, his tone held a courteous coolness. To me his behavior plainly indicated unconquerable dislike. Only toward the two children did he show another and a less austere side. Whenever their play-time arrived his chair could be heard rolling along the hall to the sunny side veranda. He seemed especially fond of Joan. Her dark head was always to be

found near his lighter one. Their conversations were long and mysterious, running from the deepest gravity, when Joan appeared to do most of the talking, to sheer fun, to judge from the little girl's peals of treble laughter, which came to my ears while I sat reading or sewing in my own shadowy room. Indeed, I was beginning to grow sensitive about my little satellite's desertion when something happened to turn the channel of my thoughts.

To every one's unspoken surprise, Miss Haldayne failed to come down to breakfast one morning. She had a headache, Miss Drusilla was informed curtly through the closed door when she wheezed her way up to her sister's room to inquire. Eliza Haldayne with a headache,— or giving in to one if that phenomenon had actually occurred! My reason rejected the idea and my thoughts busied themselves throughout breakfast to such effect that when I had finally pushed my chair from the table and followed Joan and Harry from the room, I was not too greatly astonished to see my employer half hidden behind the red portières which hung before the arch of the shadowy back parlor. As she saw herself observed her fingers were laid on her lips, black eyes, compelling, resting on my face.

She was unseen, either by the children skipping before me or by Miss Drusilla lumbering

behind. I obeyed the unspoken command in that stern face and, calling to the children, I sent them scampering to the school-room by themselves. Miss Drusilla wheezed her way down the side hall to the broom-closet.

I stepped behind the heavy curtain.

Miss Haldayne shut and locked the door and pulled the curtain over the keyhole before she faced me. Her lips were compressed rigidly, her eyes were glassy in the dim light which seeped between the chinks of the shutters.

"Ann,"— the dead calmness of her voice was more nerve-racking than sheer panic would have been —"this morning I found another of those notes."

CHAPTER IX

ANN PUTS HER TRUST IN FLOUR

JUST why memory paints the back parlor at Dune House in such hateful shades I have often wondered. Nothing ever happened there, — nothing, that is, more than happened in the other rooms of the rambling great house. The same subtle menace overhung them all; yet, oddly enough, this one close-shuttered room incurred my remembered dislike more than any. There was something about its high-ceiled gloom, about the sepulchral hush which seemed to brood in its musty hangings, in the protruding knobs of the ugly walnut furniture thrusting themselves out of the shadows; something about the unpleasant high lights on the glass covering crayons of dead-and-gone people, which was indescribably dreary.

Here the unwholesome spirit of the place became a very tangible presence. I felt my nerves recoil from its black threat; felt upon me eyes which I could not see; felt my courage grow faint with the chill of its being as I took the slip of

paper from Eliza Haldayne's unsteady extended hand.

The sprawling, uneven writing was shockingly familiar; more picturesquely cryptic than before:

So surely as the sun rises, so surely will They come. Was the Pack of The Yellow Wolf ever known to tire?

I handled the paper with a repugnance I could barely conceal and remained silent.

Miss Haldayne continued in that visibly maintained calm: "It was there when I got up this morning. My desk was open — *this* lying in the center. My own paper and pen had been used to write it, even though I'd put the pen in a place I never keep it. Ann, my door was locked when I went to bed last night; it was locked this morning when I got up. Ann, *how do they get in?*"

The poignant cry sent another shiver of fear through me. All of the old ghost-stories, all of the too-highly seasoned literature with which I had tortured an alert imagination during childhood, trooped back on my paralyzed reason. Limp apparitions through which the hand passed when it sought to grasp them; clammy specters with an unattractive habit of carrying their heads in their extended hands; white maidens unpleasantly allowing the background to be seen

through their misty figures, filed in gruesome procession before me. *What,* in Heaven's name, was it that could pass through locked doors and barred windows to leave this eerie trail behind it? For the moment intelligence was cowed beneath the race-old dread of the supernatural; then that lately acquired skepticism struggled toward daylight.

"Miss Haldayne,"—I spoke impatiently,—"how am I to help you if I am left in the dark like this? Tell me of what you 're afraid, whom you suspect. Then we can put our heads together and make some progress. This way I 'm left utterly at sea."

For the moment she seemed torn by some inward struggle, her fierce black eyes staring at the end of the room where the sun had thrust one golden sliver through the shutters to tremble on the faded stuffed back of a chair. Her mouth was grim, but the usually quiet fingers were nervously folding her percale skirt into innumerable little pleats, the only sign of the tumult raging beneath her calm. Finally she spoke in a tight voice.

"Nothing to tell," she brought out stubbornly. "I could n't figure it out myself, that 's all. *I* don't know what the thing means,"—her eyes shifted here, then came back to rest too defiantly on my face. "I can't understand how any—

how any one could get into my room when I 'd locked the door; how they could find my pen when I 'd hidden it, and write this without waking me. I 'm a light sleeper, especially lately. The thing 's beyond me. I told you because I just had to tell somebody. It 's a fool trick; I knew you could n't help, but — I just had to tell somebody! "

She wheeled abruptly and left, her starched skirts rattling down the long hall, the high window at the end framing her ever-diminishing silhouette in a border of white light.

I stood motionless for the moment in the back parlor, too astonished to move. I was not accustomed to thinking of Miss Haldayne in feminine terms, but that betraying weakness of femininity, whether it comes from blond curls and organdie, or, as in this case, from gray hair and percale,— this indiscreet indulgence in revealing a secret for the mere relief of sharing it,— struck a fountain of sympathy in me.

I returned to the school-room in a daze. Of the cryptic wording of the note I could make little sense, but it had a bizarre form, an embroidery of language which pointed to the Oriental — which pointed to the figure I disliked and distrusted most in this strange household. It could be no one but Hoang who had access to the keys of the house, who could prowl at his ease when

the place was wrapped in darkness,— Hoang, who could move so silently in his felt slippers that one was not aware he was behind one until the startled nerves jumped. Miss Haldayne's stubborn refusal to accept this obvious solution filled me with impatience. Very well, I told the tight-lipped girl in the mirror as I tidied the top of my dresser, if Hoang could prowl through the sleeping house at night, so could I. I too would borrow the weapons of stealth. I nerved myself to this by an unusual severity of manner, a severity which caused the two children to eye me with unspoken astonishment, their little hearts feeling that something was wrong which their little tongues could not express. For the first time I caused Joan tears when I discovered her rather unbeautifully chewing gum — obtained the good Lord alone knows where. At any other time the frightened astonishment of those dark eyes would have shamed me into mildness; now, however, I assumed the air of an offended goddess and gingerly holding the confiscated package between thumb and forefinger I dropped it into the waste-basket in my own room. How are the mighty fallen! I could not foresee the use I was to make of that offending gum a few short hours from then.

In the middle of the afternoon, when Joan's distant treble proclaimed her whereabouts as

well as that of Harry and the paralytic man to be on the ocean veranda; when I had heard Miss Drusilla wheeze up to her diurnal siesta and Miss Haldayne, I knew, was cleaning out the preserve-closet with Hoang's assistance, I slipped into the Chinaman's room through the door, half-opened to give free draft to the ocean breeze. It might have been the room of an ascetic. A small white iron cot, two prim chairs, a "Rock of Ages" in a deep frame made of putty and sea-shells,— surely *that* had begun its life in some New England seaside village,— and, what I was looking for, a Bible, its black leather cover worn brown from much handling, lying in state on the small marble-topped table.

I lifted the limp black cover. I was not disappointed. There were several texts, favorites apparently, copied in a neat copperplate hand on the yellowed fly-leaf. I compared them with the note I had retained. I had not expected to find a marked similarity between the two, but the lack of *any* likeness in the handwritings left me more puzzled than before. I silently replaced the book and returned to my own room.

That night I blew out my center hanging-lamp at the usual hour for retiring and sat quietly in the dark, fully clothed, waiting.

It is an awesome thing to listen to a house settling down for the night. I heard Miss Dru-

silla, Miss Haldayne, Hoang, go to their rooms in turn. Now it seemed that the old building was turning in, and doing so with a variety of grunts and creaks, of ghostly sighs and stealthy steps of which I had not been cognizant by day. Was it a troubled conscience which was hurting the old place and causing its nocturnal grumbles? I heard ghostly doors open and slyly shut where doors had never been; a hall stair squeaked as though under an unseen foot, though I was certain that nothing had passed my door to go down it. There was but little breeze to-night and what there was blew from the land. The sound of the ocean was very far away, like the muffled roaring inside a sea-shell; the darkness was rich and brooding. A hollow boom sounded from the dark cavern of downstairs. I was instantly all nerves, but it was followed by another and still others; the tall grandfather's clock in the living-room was striking eleven. At the cessation of the solemn strokes the silence appeared to surge in again. I heard spectral clocks ticking and abruptly stop. A board snapped in the hall outside and I jumped. The next moment I took myself severely in hand, and, breath suspended, stealthily opened the door and crept into the dark passage.

The myriad little lamps which blossomed exotically on their myriad little shelves were blown

out,— Hoang's last duty before he retired,— but their coal-oil ghosts still lingered. The stairway was a gaping void which led downward to stygian depths, but I had my teeth set hard on my courage by now. The stairs creaked abominably as I gave them my weight. My heart was pounding my ribs with sledge-hammer blows when I finally gained the lower hall and stood, one foot still lingering on the unseen stairs, one hand gripped about the smooth, worn banister.

Still only the mysterious snaps and creaks which, reason hysterically assured me, was merely contraction in the old boards after the heat of the day. Above-stairs all seemed sleeping.

I groped my way silently down the long hall, past the dismal back parlor, past the more cheerful sitting-room where a weak, watery moon, just broken through the fog, glanced slyly in through the wire-meshed window to peek at me as I slid by the half-opened door.

What subtle change is it that a great house undergoes at night? Familiar things are indescribably altered; it is as though well-known features were lit with a strange expression. Not that it is lonely,— it is not here that the threat lies,— rather it is from the lack of aloneness that our nerves shrink, from some too-vital presence just hidden from our eyes, as though dark-

ness embodied the mean, harmful thoughts of the daytime and gave them the right to move about the place of their birth. This fancy was pregnant with horrid possibilities. The shadows took on substance; they became something less than human, more than ether. They seemed to brush me as I slipped through them like the disgusting cobwebs in my nightmare on the night of the death-howl. An old childish fear of the dark was uncovered in my mind. I remembered the times when, afraid to admit the weakness to adults, I would bellow hymns at the top of my frightened lungs if it became necessary to go into a dark room, like a little pagan putting my trust in signs and spells. The memory was a godsend now; it fanned to life my flickering sense of humor and strengthened my shaking knees. Ridicule, even when self-administered, is an effective stimulant.

So through what seemed endless years of groping I came to the kitchen at the extreme end of the passage. Up to now I had been moving in a strange world, dependent upon touch and hearing,— senses used at but half their power in these degenerate days. Now the king of the faculties, Sight, leaped to command with the opening of the door to the moon-flooded kitchen, and instantly my world spun in its accustomed orbit again.

The moon was near its zenith as I slipped into the deserted room and noiselessly closed the door behind me. It imprinted the great white square of the window, mesh-covered, on the floor. It cast precise black shadows of the pots and pans hanging in prim rows about the wainscoting and showed the squatting great coal-stove in the corner like some clumsy quadruped, crouched to spring.

My movements were less fearful as I crossed swiftly to the dish-closet. I found what I wanted instantly, a shallow china dish. There was a slight protesting squeak from the flour-bin when I opened it — was there ever a flour-bin that would n't squeak! — then I had scooped up a dishful of flour, closed the bin, and was on the return journey, noiselessly releasing the knob of the kitchen door after me. Exultation at successfully accomplishing half of my mission had banished the childish fear by now. All day I had been haunting the hall, awaiting my chance to slip into the kitchen and get this flour, and all day Hoang had unknowingly prevented me. In the dark I felt my face taking on what a room-mate had once called my "Scotch expression." I was grimly resolved to make some headway in the maddening mystery which was clinging to the old house, and of which Miss Haldayne had so stubbornly refused to speak. A little

flour sprinkled before her door, where in the blackness an unsuspecting foot must step into it, and much would be clear that was now too tantalizingly vague. Unless the writer of those mysterious notes could fly, some record of his passing would be written in the trap. If no visit was to be made to Miss Haldayne to-night (I grimly tightened my lips here), I should continue to sprinkle flour and keep it up until some evidence was obtained. If she were confronted by the flat imprint of Hoang's felt slipper, Miss Haldayne's stubborn belief was bound to be broken down.

All this time I was silently stealing along the dark lower hall once more, past the empty rooms, their doors yawning like the mouths of so many caves. From the little sitting-room came a hollow boom which threatened the flour-dish in my hand and turned me weak for the moment, until reason recognized it as the grandfather clock striking eleven-thirty.

I found the foot of the stairs and cautiously ran one hand along the banister, testing each step tentatively before I mounted. I had made seven of them in dead silence when something — that sixth sense, perhaps, which scientists cannot classify — stopped me, frozen in the act of stepping up.

I have marveled at this since; certainly my physical ears had heard nothing, nor had my

strained eyes seen, yet I stopped as a horse will stop on an apparently empty road when danger lurks in the bend ahead.

Then it came; the sound I had heard *before* it came; a protesting creak from the blackness above me, a creak that grows only from a heavy weight. The meaning burst on my brain like a blinding light and I staggered mentally. *Some one was standing on the stairs ahead, blocking my way.*

After the first numb chill this brought, circulation surged through me again; without facing about I promptly stepped back, noiselessly feeling for the stair below with my stockinged foot. There was no very definite thought in my head; one does not think at such a time, I 've found out. I acted instinctively, choosing the only way out which was open to me.

Four — three — two, I backed, frantic at the need for silence which forbade more haste. My face was glued fearfully to the area of blackness out of which another muffled squeak had come as the heavy weight was shifted down a step.

The moon was coming about the corner of the house; the high narrow window in the bend of the stairs was growing gray; in another minute it would silhouette the stealthy figure. Perhaps Hoang had heard me moving about the kitchen and had come down to investigate. I was, in a

way, to have my curiosity satisfied with disquieting promptness.

My backing foot felt frantically for the floor, found it, and I lowered myself to the hall as the black silhouette of a groping hand stole across the graying window-pane.

I did not flee, I could not. I was rooted to the spot by terrified curiosity. My heart was chill, my tongue cleaved dryly to the roof of my mouth, my eyes fastened on that growing hand.

The window was being slowly eclipsed now, the arm to the elbow — to the shoulder — then the head, came to view, bordered in gray light from the moon-flooded dunes outside.

The terror I had known before was nothing to this that overwhelmed me now; the horror I had known was a mere pin-prick to the sharp fright that pierced my heart. I did not scream merely because I could not; only my stiffened fingers gripped over the edge saved the flour-dish from crashing to the floor in the dark. The figure silhouetted there against the narrow window was not the figure of Hoang; it was the paralytic man — *and walking!*

CHAPTER X

MIDNIGHT PROWLERS

AS the figure passed the gray square and the window became unblemished again, the apathy of fear which had held me gave way to terrified energy. One hand outstretched ahead of me, to save my eyes from unexpected door-jambs, I flew before it down the dark hall, my stockinged feet making no noise, luckily, though silence was now secondary to the blind need for haste.

Why I did not slip into one of the opened side rooms — the front parlor or the sitting-room, whose yawning door invited — I have since asked myself. The mind can hold but one object in time of panic, one image of safety on which the mental shutter refuses to close. Now my mind was focussed on one lone place of refuge, the kitchen I had just quitted, where the moon took away the threat the darkness held. I fumbled the knob and it rattled; the door clicked ever so slightly as I closed it. I slumped on the floor, between the wall and the stove, my heart

rocking me with its mighty thumps. I did not faint,— I am not the fainting kind,— but my knees had turned to water and refused to support me longer. Not even when I heard the kitchen door slowly open and saw a dark figure slip through did I faint, though my heart must surely have been heard by the intruder and my eyes ached with the intensity of my stare.

I was out of sight there in the shadows down by the stove, but the darkness was suddenly cleft by a thin shaft of white light and the electric torch found my huddled form and splashed across my face.

That broke the spell which held me. The flour-dish tilted and its contents cascaded down my skirt. As though he read the impulse in my face, the light suddenly winked out and the man had swooped and grasped me painfully by the throat.

"Don't scream, I won't hurt you!" It was a fierce whisper; then, more calmly, as I proved my total inability to do anything like screaming: "If I let you go, will you promise to be quiet? I give my word I 'll not hurt you. Promise?"

I wagged my head feebly, the only thing I could do, and he released me slowly, ready to throttle me again at the first indication of breaking my word. For the moment I could only swallow to relieve my outraged windpipe, then

I recovered the half-emptied dish, the flour trickling to the floor in a little white waterfall as I did so.

Much of my terror was gone now. Here was treachery instead of mystery. The paralytic blind man, who was neither paralyzed nor blind (the eyes hidden behind the smoked glasses were handsome hazel ones, bright as Joan's own), regarded me sternly.

"What do you mean by slipping about the house at this hour of the night?" he demanded in a stern whisper.

It was an excellent bracer. My backbone straightened and my cold face suddenly tingled. "What do *you* mean," I whispered hotly back, "by imposing on all of us! — by pretending to be paralyzed when you can snoop about the place after we 've all gone to bed! — pretending to be blind when you can see in the dark —!"

I choked and he shook his head warningly in the moonlight.

"Not so loud; they 'll hear upstairs," he whispered. "Look here, it 's cards on the table for both of us. You 're the last person I expected to run into. Do you mind explaining? Why the flour?"

"Not at all," I returned in a cool whisper, though my heart was pounding, "if you 'll first explain why the walk?"

He laughed silently. I could see the hazel eyes twinkling in the moonlight and I was aware of a secret gladness, even under my fright, that they could twinkle like that instead of being forever darkened behind disfiguring glasses.

"I asked first. My explanation is long. Politeness requires —"

"Oh, all right." I tried to be calm. "A mustard-plaster. I have a touch of pleurisy and I did n't think it necessary to wake the whole house over it."

He looked at the flour still left in the dish, at the white Niagara which had left its trace on my skirt.

"That would make a mustard-plaster for an elephant,— one learns such things on the western front. However, a mustard-plaster goes with me. It 's a poor time to make a long explanation, but I 'll be as brief as possible. There 's no one over us, that 's a blessing. My room 's above here; that 's how I happened to hear you. I don't believe there 's another soul awake in the place."

He paused and we both listened intently for a moment, heads slightly on one side, ears strained to catch the faintest noise. The silence almost rang in its intensity. Then, in a whisper which certainly did not penetrate beyond the closed kitchen, the man spoke.

"There 's only one way to tell this so you 'll see it in its real colors; that 's from the beginning, and the beginning is Florence — Joan and Harry's mother. I first saw Florence when I was a boy of thirteen. She was eighteen then and one of the most charming things God ever made." He gave a short, noiseless laugh. "I must have been an odd sort of little tad. You see, my father had always lived abroad with me after my mother's death. Florence was my aunt — it seems strange to think of her in that relationship. All the adoration of a rather romantic boy with old-world standards was lavished on her. Don't laugh, Miss Belmont," I had shown no intention of so doing. "It was calf love, I know, or is it so calf-like, that first pure, worshipful adoration a very young boy feels for a pretty woman who has been kind to him, a woman who is a star to his lofty fancy? Why don't they call it knight love? That was the way I adored Florence." He stopped and listened intently. I too strained my ears to the silence. Then in a moment he spoke again in the same guarded whisper.

"I think Florence knew it, her manner was so sweetly sympathetic. I left before that ideal could be dissipated. My father died over there in Europe and I went to Manila, to my mother's people. I 'm making this short, so I 'll come

back again to Florence. The next time I saw her, I was in my twenties. I had seen more of the world by then and in my mind was a little superior pity for the callow youth I had been. I called for old times' sake. It was one of those fortunate calls; the beginning of a swift and strong friendship, a friendship I still feel though I 'm the only one left now. She was married; I saw the two youngsters then — Harry was only a baby. Rather to my surprise — life makes us so skeptical! — she was even more charming in her maturity than she had remained in my boyish fancy." He suddenly broke off and looked at me intently.

" Odd, our standing here calmly, like this, as though we were not the only ones awake in this great house. I 've always thought such scenes, long explanations like this, were overdrawn in fiction; yet it seems quite natural now."

The same thought had occurred to me, but I only nodded impatiently. My nerves had been shattered that night, but I was determined to let no explanations be postponed, now that I was holding one thread to the mystery.

He correctly interpreted my gesture and proceeded. " I like to think now what a clear, true friendship that short visit created between Florence, between Harry her husband and me. I was a trusted younger brother to them — the

truest friends I have ever had in my life. Well, I 'm going into this detail so you 'll understand why I acted as I did.

" They were flung from a machine, after I had returned to Manila; Harry was instantly killed. Florence lingered some weeks. And she wrote me a letter.

" Mail was slow in getting to the Philippines. The war in Europe had embroiled us then. When that letter reached Manila I was in France. It was forwarded there. Florence had been dead eight months when I learned of it. It was not a long letter. Sweet and straightforward, like Florence herself. She had known that she would not recover and her care was for her children. Their only other relatives were her own sisters, Eliza and Drusilla. Florence did not state why,— she was always slow to reflect unfavorably on any one,— but I could read her terror of the children going to live with them. I read a fear into that letter, a fear lying between the lines as though Florence herself were not sure what she dreaded, for it certainly was not there when the eye alone scanned the words. She wanted me to have the children, to put them in a school if necessary, but not to let them remain under the same roof with the aunts. Evidently she anticipated no trouble in this. There

was nothing mentioned in her will and Harry had made none. My only claim to the children was that given me by the mother's letter and — one of war's little ironies, Miss Belmont; the barracks are poor safeguards for valuables — that letter was lost. Destroyed, no doubt, as rubbish when I was wounded."

Once again he paused and we listened to the ringing silence which filled the house. He had spoken rapidly but with all caution. I touched his sleeve as a signal to resume the story.

"It was being wounded which first suggested this masquerade to my mind. A fall from an aëroplane resulted in temporary paralysis and a severe shock to the optic nerve. During the long warm afternoons while I lay in that French hospital, listening to the distant exploding of bombs, I planned future action. I never for a moment doubted I should get well; all the doctors assured me of that. When I was permitted I determined to come to this coast and get possession of the children, to take them back to Manila with me if necessary.

"That vague fear in Florence's letter had me worried. I recalled my Aunt Eliza as a tall, dark, austere woman, nothing at all like sweet Florence, or the frivolous beauty of the family, Drusilla. I sensed a poignant appeal in the let-

ter and connected it with Aunt Eliza. But there was nothing definite, no fact on which to hang a theory."

He was silent for a moment, while his anxious hazel eyes seemed studying my face through the semi-gloom. The moon sailed behind a cloud, but I could feel the intent gaze still upon me. His voice came out of the darkness in a vibrant whisper:

"When I came to San Francisco I found the same morass of vagueness surrounding me. Only two elderly sisters remained of the once numerous Haldaynes,— two spinsters living down here in a moldy house among desolate sand-dunes. Not until I had proved myself beyond all doubt as being a blood relation was I able to wring this much from the family lawyer, a dusty little man in a monk's cell of an office. The maddening air of mystery, the exasperating caution which shrouded each point made me pause. My one legal claim to the children — Florence's letter —was lost. If for some hidden reason of her own Aunt Eliza wished to put up a fight for their guardianship, I was beaten before I began. I determined to fight fire with fire,— to discover how the land lay and learn what that vague terror could be that I sensed in Florence's letter.

"My recent accident suggested a way to do this. My Filipino 'boy' was the one human I

trusted to help me act the part. You know the rest. I rather counted on you to help me if necessary, the day I first saw you."

"But you seemed to dislike —" I stopped in confusion.

"I seemed to dislike you?" He finished it for me, his tone suddenly warm and friendly. "I was afraid of you, my little lady. Your gray eyes are as bright and quick as a sea-bird's. I trembled for my disguise when you drew near."

There was a subtle compliment in his tone, something that sent a delicious thrill of excitement chasing up my back. As a consequence my tone was unusually severe when I responded:

"What have you discovered? What is the mystery of this place?"

I sensed that he made a baffled gesture in the dark. "I don't know," and his voice was weary. "Something 's wrong — you 've felt that, I guess. I 've been questioning Joan, the little sieve! She 's given me a jumble of fact and fancy which has led me no farther than my own nose. Aunt Eliza 's bitterly afraid of something, but with Joan's chatter of Bluebeard Chambers, of something 'scary' in the sand-dunes, of Hoang's nightmares, and a lot more vague stuff, I 'll confess I 'm at sea."

He paused as though waiting for me to say something. Certainly I was farther along than

George Rogers Haldayne toward the solving of the mystery. As yet he knew, or pretended to know, nothing about the mysterious notes. I had seen the Chinaman up the gully. I sensed Miss Drusilla's fear of the secret room. I had recognized Hoang's nightmare for what it really was. Yet I said nothing.

As though determined to pry an opinion from me, he spoke again. "You have felt this menace too; what do you think of it?"

The words rushed from me against my will. "I don't trust Hoang."

His quiet whisper came back: "Neither do I. That fellow has something to do with it, I 'm sure. Aunt Eliza 's keen for him, though."

A sudden repugnance at thus standing here in the dark kitchen discussing my employer in whispers, swept over me. His next words interrupted my silent movement toward the door.

"I heard some one moving around down here; my room 's right above, you know. I suspected it was the Chinaman up to some deviltry, so I came down. I had no idea of scaring the wits out of you."

Unconsciously he moved one hand in the gloom and what fitful light there was outlined dully the ugly stub of an automatic in his hand. It sent a peculiar nausea over me. My whisper shook when it came.

"We must n't stand here talking. They 're liable to hear us. To-morrow, when you 're on the veranda, I 'll pretend to read to you and we can discuss it then."

I jumped as his hand crept over mine in the gloom. "You 're a marvel, Miss Belmont. You 're the most wonderful girl I 've ever known!" His tone, cramped though it was into a whisper, was vibrant, caressing even. The warm magnetism of his touch, the intent gaze of his hazel eyes through the dusk, made my silly heart leap like any romantic school-girl's.

I almost snatched my hand away and answered tartly: "Your acquaintance must have been sadly limited then, Mr. Haldayne. I 've got to go up and make my mustard-plaster."

I heard him smother a chuckle at the flatness of this and we slipped out into the long black hall.

Following a man with a pistol up a dark staircase is an infinite improvement upon slipping down those same stairs alone. The trip was made in a silence like death, save for two creaks. In the black upper hall I found my own door and opened it noiselessly. An encouraging grip on the wrist and my companion crept silently by to his own. I did not hear a click as he let himself into his room, but I sensed the moment the door closed.

In the black area of my own room I waited, sitting tensely on the edge of the bed, the flour-dish, for which I had risked so much, cradled in my lap.

Moments passed, endless eons of time, a little foretaste of eternity. I heard the clock boom twelve and again become swallowed up in silence. Still I sat on, ears strained, hands folded — and chewing gum! chewing, with a rhythmic and businesslike intensity, the very gum I had confiscated from Joan that afternoon. And as I chewed my thoughts churned steadily over the events of the evening, over the story George Rogers Haldayne had told me, reliving the moment of terror in the kitchen, the moment of relief which had followed — that thrilling moment of nearness when he whispered how wonderful I was — and always here I took myself severely in hand and chewed more vigorously than ever.

When enough time had elapsed for the creation of an entire new solar system, another hollow boom welled up through the aching void.

Then I arose and, dish firmly gripped, felt my way to the door. Only my sense of direction told me that I was out in the hall, for the moon had disappeared by now and the thick blackness lay heavy everywhere. My finger-tips brushed the walls as I stole down to Miss Haldayne's room. Deep breathing came faintly from behind the

door, and my pounding heart outraced it while I scattered the flour on the floor boards.

A return trip to my own opened room, to leave the now empty dish on the untouched bed, then I was out in the black hall once more, my stockinged feet treading their cautious way to the door of Hoang.

To my excited fancy the pounding of my heart was filling the empty place with echoes. My fingers shook as I pulled a hair from my head. I fumbled the mass of chewing-gum while I extracted two small pieces, my tense face screwed up with dislike of the sticky mess. The rest rather unsanitarily went back into my mouth while I reached up and stretched the hair across the crack between the door and its jamb, and sealed each end with a tiny wad of gum.

I heard the Chinaman turn over restlessly and my heart stood still until deep respiration told of his continued slumber.

My arms were heavy with weakness when I dropped them to my sides after my task, but there was a fierce satisfaction in my brain. No one could leave the room that night without betraying it by the broken hair in the morning.

I was calmer as I moved to Miss Drusilla's room and repeated the process, sacrificing another hair to the cause. There was something reassuring about Miss Drusilla's frank snores.

For a moment, after completing this I stood considering, my arms hanging inertly down in the dark.

The result of this cogitation sent me farther up the hall to another door, and as I worked I silently apostrophized the inmate:

"You 're very nice and very plausible and I hope you 're true, but I can take no chances. And I may be 'wonderful' but I 'm sure that ever so many girls have found you handsome. You are, you know."

The Filipino occupied a cot in his master's room. The children were obviously not to be considered. My work was done for that night.

Only when I slid between the cold sheets and lay shivering in the dark did the reaction come. But through the nervous trembling a gleam of humor persisted,— a gleam of humor and self-congratulation. Whoever should leave his room to prowl about the house in the night would unwittingly betray himself. The mystery of the threatening notes was about to be solved.

"With many thanks to Mr. Balzac," I murmured sleepily to myself as the opiate warmth of the bed stole over me, "though he did not employ anything so plebeian as gum!" and my last lingering of consciousness was a mental picture of the high-windowed college library, where I had pored over the works of the great Frenchman.

CHAPTER XI

QUESTIONS WITHOUT ANSWERS

THE muffled clamor of the alarm clock, placed beneath my pillow that it might not rouse the entire household, woke me the next morning. For a moment I lay staring in perplexity at the early light that filled the squares of windows, then remembrance swooped upon me; the fantastic happenings of the night before were recalled, curiosity rose a-tiptoe as to what my shrewdness had netted me this morning.

I dressed hurriedly in the cold dampness flooding the room and quietly let myself out into the hall I had haunted so assiduously last night. It was still shadowy this morning, save where the high window in the bend of the staircase at each end slanted a pale rectangle on the floor. The rows of doors blankly closed on each other.

My eyes leaped ahead of my cautious feet and sought the dim white patch before Miss Haldayne's door. It was unmarred.

Apparently no threatening note had been left last night. Curiously enough, there was disap-

pointment mingled with my relief. To scan the hair-sealed doors was only a form now. I did it perfunctorily, not surprised to find them undisturbed.

Returning to my own room for paper and a whisk-broom, I brushed up the flour, removing the last traces of it with a towel impressed as a dust-cloth. Then, hearing the alarm-clock ring in Hoang's room, I fled and sat on the edge of the bed while I waited for a more conventional rising-hour. But a grim resolve had formed in my mind, an iron determination to carry out this same program every night until the mystery was run to earth. One of these days there would be a footprint in the flour, sometime a broken hair would unfailingly reveal who had opened his door in the hush of the night. Until then my Scotch tenacity could afford to wait.

Restlessness drove me to the breakfast-room before the others this morning. There was the usual taciturn nod from Hoang, who continued to shuffle between breakfast-room and kitchen as he set the table. To avoid his almost contemptuous disregard I moved to the window and stood quietly between their curtains, my eyes plunging through the stout wire mesh to the undulating sand-dunes and the tumbling ocean beyond.

The fog had not entirely lifted. The whole scene swam in half-opaque light with the milky

whiteness of an opal. The faint rose of the rising sun, only half dreamed of as yet, was the fire in the heart of the jewel. The sea was an indefinite moving mass out there in the fog, slowly lifting and settling like a restless ghost. A faint wind went scurrying through the bunch-grass, blowing from no apparent direction, turning aimlessly upon itself, whisking back as though around invisible corners, blowing little sand eddies before it, shaking the lupines in a half-hearted way, as though it were searching for something, something about which it was not very clear in its own mind.

I felt a sympathy for that bewildered morning breeze. Into it I read my own aimless turnings and gropings, my half-directed searchings for a solution about which I could only wildly conjecture. The pat words of the Old Tentmaker stirred in my mind and my lips formed them noiselessly, my eyes still on the aimless trail in the nodding lupines:

> . . . like wind along the waste
> I know not whither, willy-nilly blowing.

I was playing with the thought when the unmistakable sense of some one's eyes upon me stung my brain to alertness and I wheeled to find the Chinaman regarding me unwinkingly a few feet away.

His eyes were not on my face, but there was no mistaking the black venom which glittered in them. Instinctively I followed his gaze. It led to the faint white trace on my blue-serge skirt where last night the flour had trickled down it. I must have made a guilty movement, a start, or a half-formed gesture to hide it with my hand, for he spoke, though his eyes did not waver from the white stain.

"Missy Belmont get flour? This morning I find flour on kitchen floor."

Indignation at my own carelessness and a touch of that fright Hoang could ever inspire in me, caused my voice to shake a trifle as I answered this in a carefully careless tone:

"Yes, last night I got some flour for a mustard-plaster. I may have spilt a little on the floor. I really did n't notice in the dark."

The Chinese eyes crept up and up. They seemed to have weight like other crawling things; it was an eternity before they reached my own rigidly composed gaze. In the direct light from the window they scintillated like two black beads; two beads held stationary between the double folds of flesh which formed the lids. I found myself noticing them with an attention to detail which afterward amazed me. Hoang's eyes were not oblique; no Chinaman's are. It is the inability to open them in the inner corners as

wide as can the Western races which lends that delusion.

For a heart-stopping moment my gaze plunged miles deep into those glittering black irises. It was much like looking into a dark well to the half-dreamed-of shimmer of water somewhere far down in the depths. The black venom was oozing up to meet me; I felt cold, felt my face settling into a rigid mask. "I 'm being hypnotized!" flashed across my tottering mind. The thought pried me from the horrid lethargy, my eyes could not wrench away, but I felt my thoughts fluttering backward as a bird flutters before the gaze of a snake.

As though he sensed the mental resistance, something seemed to close beneath the surface of the black irises as a camera shutter closes. The terrible weight of his eyes lifted, the voice came, a soft hissing, pregnant with hidden meaning.

"Missy Belmont, I think you not walk around house at night. Not good; you stay in room at night, I think so."

That was all, Hoang had gone, shuffling back to the kitchen through the little pass pantry, a model of silent docility, an irreproachable Chinese servant in immaculate white linen.

Feet descended the hall stairs, the capable swish of starched percale filled the air, and Miss Haldayne entered the room. For the moment

the familiar bustle of her movements deceived me; nor did her preoccupied "good morning" mean anything to my upset mind.

She crossed to the old black walnut china-closet and began to rearrange the cups and saucers, breaking their orderly files only to push them again to the same rigid formation. The aimlessness of this finally penetrated my abstraction when a cup almost crashed to the floor. I raised my eyes to her half-averted face and a low exclamation of alarm was jerked from me. That face was bleak and gray with fright.

At the noise she wheeled nervously, her startled eyes leaped to mine and clung there wretchedly. Then her head inclined stiffly, grudgingly, as a tough-fibered eucalyptus might give before the wind. Her voice was tense: "Another, this morning, Ann. Every morning now. Ann, I *had* to tell you!"

A cold stupefaction overswept me. For the moment I could only stare back and gasp.

"Why — why —" Speech was tripped up. "Why, Miss Haldayne — it can't be."

She missed the betrayal in my words and sensed only the contradiction. The now horridly familiar paper was extended. "Read it," she commanded with something of the old command.

I had to send my eyes over it twice before I

grasped the sense of those sprawling, childish characters.

And it's so useless. All things have an end. That Which Cannot Be Hid! You know it and all your stubbornness —

My eyes jerked up to meet the wretchedness of her intent black gaze. I was dazed, my tongue thick with amazement. All I could manage was to stammer stupidly: "Why, they could n't get in! They *could n't!*"

"Seems they did," she said dryly, and I saw the muscles of her strong throat contract. She suddenly snatched the slip of paper from my nerveless fingers. "The children are coming. Not a word to any one, Ann!"

While I pretended to eat my oatmeal my dammed-up thoughts suddenly broke through the stupefaction which had retained them and flooded my brain with wildest conjecture. Something — something apparently which could walk through bolted doors and wire-meshed windows — was abroad, roaming at will after dark through the echoing great rooms and up and down the creaking staircases. I gave such a violent shudder that Miss Drusilla looked up inquiringly from sugaring her coffee, and I addressed a hurried remark to Harry to avoid her comment.

What was it that could hide from four people — six, when the pseudo invalid and his attendant were taken into account? What was it that could gain entrance to an apparently entranceless room and leave no telltale footprint? Could it see in the dark like a cat and thus avoid stepping on the betraying flour? Had it watched me through the night? Had its unwinking eyes been fastened on me as I toiled down the creaking stairs to the kitchen, watching while I scattered the flour later, brave in the fool's security that I was alone? The thought was so gruesome that it brought its own reaction. I set my mind on a more wholesome track.

Whatever it was, it was human. The childishness of the handwriting was a ruse. The note was clever in its wording, its very vagueness more tormenting than a direct threat would be. It held the half-childish taunt that I had more than once detected Miss Drusilla directing toward her sister.

Miss Drusilla!

I slyly turned my head and surveyed her with new eyes. She was placidly stirring her coffee, a pile of thickly buttered toast before her. Was it possible that the clumsy coquetry of her demeanor hid an alert vindictiveness? that a mischievous brain lay beneath the drab masses of her light hair? that her china blue eyes could

narrow speculatively, could plan this means of refined torture for the sister she so disliked? But, even granting that she was the means, how could she get into the room?

On the other hand, there were those last words of Hoang's, words that thinly veiled a threat. Why was I not to walk about the house at night if it was not to avoid meeting the mysterious writer? The remark betrayed a guilty knowledge on Hoang's part, but if Miss Drusilla was the perpetrator, why should he seek to shield her? There was ever-spiteful dislike in her attitude toward the Chinaman, a disdainful stolidity in his bearing toward her. Imagination could not stretch to conceive of a possible bond between the two.

An annoyed glance at my untouched porridge-bowl from Miss Haldayne relegated these thoughts to the background of my mind. The peculiar woman had recovered her poise to a certain extent, though her face remained strained and grayish and her eyes were haunted.

At the end of her meal she abruptly pushed back her chair and bolted into the hall as she had on that former occasion, as though fearful that the tabooed subject might arise between us, while I slowly trailed Miss Drusilla and her creaking corsets from the room.

That morning, when I took the children for

the daily scamper on the beach, I turned as I reached the foot of the shallow steps and scanned the windows of Miss Haldayne's room above me. Twenty feet from the ground though they were, I could easily see the stout rusty nails which held the heavy mesh to the window frame. Certainly the mysterious prowler had not entered here.

Half-way through the geography lesson, the last subject in our little curriculum, I heard the rhythmic squeak of the invalid chair being wheeled to the veranda. For no apparent reason, and much to my own inward disgust, I felt my cheeks burning. This interest in a man I had really seen but once set me to jeering at myself. Almost vindictively I sent Joan stumbling on an oral tour through the capitals of the United States, in a vain attempt to smother my disturbing thoughts. In my zeal I overran the study period and was recalled to myself only by two pairs of round eyes fixed on me in mute reproach.

Joan now reminded me of a doll-hat I had rashly promised to make this afternoon and a few minutes later our little procession passed along the hall toward the veranda, Harry leading the way, his short arms filled with blocks rather precariously balanced; Joan toting the life-sized doll, and lastly myself laden with the makings of diminutive millinery, my face set in

what I hoped was placid self-possession but what was doubtless a guilty rigidity.

The man in the chair stirred as our little parade clattered noisily out upon the wooden veranda and his head turned in our direction. The movement was so unconsciously appealing, when taken in connection with the legs pathetically stretched before him, that I had a weird sense of the unreality of it all. Was it possible that the pathetic dark glasses hid a pair of brightest and steadiest hazel eyes,— eyes which were no doubt scanning our faces even now and reading our innermost thoughts? Had those helpless legs crept downstairs in the dark last night, moving with the silence and sureness of a leopard? His disguise was complete. Truly, George Rogers Haldayne was a valuable ally — a formidable antagonist.

With a most casual "good morning," I sat down in a wooden rocker near by and embarked on my millinery expedition while the youngsters danced about us like irrepressible ripples.

The red promise of the sun that morning had turned into a weak saffron radiance which covered the distant sand-dunes with a thin wash of gold. No wind stirred among the sad green clumps of bunch-grass, sea-gulls high aloft in the calm day glistened like silver scales suspended

in the sky. The sun splashed across the worn gray boards of the porch, picking out russet glows in Joan's seal-brown hair, surrounding, with a light-touched halo, the recumbent head of the man. In an hour or so the ocean wind would again be sweeping bleakly over this stretch of sand, driving the afternoon fog before it; the tide would have deserted the dreary little stretch of beach, leaving it brown and naked in the murderous clutch of kelp; the brief golden radiance would have faded to a sad gray light; but for these two precious hours in the heart of the day Dune House held a dreary beauty.

I sensed the man's impatience until I had tactfully decoyed the children to a play-place out of earshot. He burst out almost immediately:

"Miss Belmont, this thing has me worried. I haven't a thing to go on but that vague fear in Florence's letter. Nothing definite has happened in the house that I can discover, but I feel it all about me — an unpleasant mystery. It's there, as real and as elusive as — cobwebs!"

His tone was impatient, yet carefully modulated that it would reach no farther than my own ears. He continued, checking a too-impetuous motion of his hand:

"Aunt Eliza's worried, worried stiff, about something. She's a tremendously nervous woman, despite that magnificent self-control

she 's acquired. She 's *afraid,* Miss Belmont. Now what the dickens is she afraid of? "

He paused, but I bent quietly over my sewing and did not speak. A wave or two rolled in to break the silence before he began again:

"Aunt Drusilla 's spiteful. I 've heard her taunt her sister — little slighting remarks about lack of personal beauty. You 've heard her too, no doubt. I wonder if that has any bearing on it? Drusilla must have something on her. There 's an old grievance there, still festering. They love each other like two strange cats, but that would n't account for that haunted look in Aunt Eliza's eyes." A frown suddenly knit his forehead. "Why don't you say something? " he inquired almost petulantly.

I looked up at this, my eyes innocent. "I have n't anything to contribute. I sense the same thing you do. There 's something wrong here at Dune House,— I 've felt that from the start,— but I can't make it out."

He suddenly chuckled. "Scotch canniness! Do all Presbyterians beseech the Lord to set a watch on their lips by day? "

I flushed at the astuteness of his suspicions. Within me a fierce debate was raging as to whether or not I should take this man into my confidence. His story last night was fantastic, but it rang true. It entirely agreed with the

brief history I had had of him through Miss Drusilla; yet something — he had called it Scotch canniness,— checked the impulse to confession.

"There is an explanation," I told myself grimly. "There 's no such thing as supernatural beings prowling about a house to leave mysterious notes in their wake." The trap could n't have been complete. There was a loophole of escape. The hair on the doors had proved that they had not been opened once I had sealed them, but there was a chance that the note had been left while I was prowling below in the dark kitchen. Then again — this thought rushed upon me, turning me cold to the tips of my toes,— every door had not been sealed. There was the door to Joan's "Bluebeard Chamber"!

These were two possibilities, even probabilities, always ignoring the bothering fact of the unmarred flour.

George Rogers Haldayne apparently knew nothing of the threatening notes, some of which had come before his arrival. He might even be able to make a guess at their origin, but that inbred caution of mine held back the mention of them.

In my reply I ignored the raillery of his last remark: "Joan told you of the secret room?"

"The Bluebeard Chamber, yes. What do you know of it, Miss Belmont?"

"Only as much as you do. Except — once I ran down the wrong flight of stairs by mistake. When I first came here, you know. I thought I was at the door of the little sitting-room, but as I took hold of the knob I heard Miss Drusilla cry out in alarm. She was sorting sheets in the downstairs linen-closet. She told me never to go in there; that Miss Haldayne would be very much annoyed. She said no one ever went there save Miss Haldayne. There was no concealment of the fact that she was very much frightened."

"But you never looked in the room?"

"It 's locked. The shutters are closed. One can't see through the keyhole."

He laughed at the naïveté of this and I joined him at my own expense. "I was going to climb a ladder and look through a missing slat of the shutter, the day you came."

"I saw you." He chuckled again. "You looked so slim and helpless on that ladder — and so scared! — like a little ruffled sparrow clinging to an uncomfortable perch."

His tone held again the half-laughing note of admiration of last night. My silly heart skipped a beat, but my voice grew severe: "Our mystery leads us nowhere, apparently."

"Rebuked!"

I looked up with all the cold dignity I could command, then quickly lowered my head over my

sewing again. The dark glasses were turned full in my direction; I could imagine the teasing light in the hazel eyes behind them.

"There 's something wonderfully attractive about sparrows, don't you think so, Miss Belmont?"

A flirtation with the governess relieves boredom when there is nothing more attractive to do. I reminded myself of this sharply and my reply came with casual tartness:

"Hardly. Nasty, disagreeable little things, I think."

I could feel the delighted twinkle of those hidden eyes. "Maybe you 're right," with mock deliberation, and his lips twitched.

I kept my countenance, but I hated myself for the red tide I could feel pushing its way into my face, and I was grateful for the dark glasses which must have covered my confusion. My work was examined with the squinted eye of a connoisseur, then with regained self-possession I inquired, "What do you think can be in the secret room? Do you think that would have any bearing on the mystery?"

"It 's probably an empty room like those bedrooms upstairs. Perhaps Aunt Eliza stores trunks in it. A youngster can make a mystery out of any dark hole, and Joan's choice of books has been rather lurid, I 've discovered."

I nodded gravely. "I 've thought the same thing — then again — well, I 'll be happier when I know what 's in it and if those shutters are closed merely to keep the carpet from fading."

There was another silence, broken only by the surge of the sea and the happy quarreling of the children in the corner. Again I fought down the impulse to give this man my confidence, to relate the mystery of the notes, to speak of the Chinaman hidden up the gully, of the death-howl in the night and the dancing lights far out on the dunes. Once the impulse to tell of the trap I had so cleverly set and which had been more cleverly evaded, nearly grew to words, then that wise old Scotch saw stirred in my cautious mind: "Tell na'body; that lessens suspicion by one."

He finally broke the silence by saying slowly: "I don't see why, but I can't rid myself of a dislike for Hoang. He 's so taciturn; there 's something about him — something —"

"Kitty-catty!" I put in whole-heartedly as he hesitated. "He 's always behind you when you least expect it. He knew I was downstairs last night, by the flour on the kitchen floor. No, no," at his look of alarm, "he does n't suspect you, I 'm sure. But he told me it was not good to wander about the house in the dark. His words were almost a threat, Mr. Haldayne. Yet I 'm sure he does n't leave his room at night —" I

stopped short, confused at my unconscious betrayal.

Again came the desire to confide in the man and again I resolutely fought it down. For in the back of my brain a stern impulse was stirring. Somewhere there must have been a flaw in my reasoning. The mysterious intruder may have entered Miss Haldayne's room *before* I had set my floury trap, *before* I sealed the doors with the hair. To-night I would try my luck again, to-night the telltale flour would be sprinkled in the hall once more, and all the doors — even the door of the secret room — should be sealed before I went to bed.

Nor did I foresee that the next day would find me sorely perplexed and frightened, turning to this man as an ally.

CHAPTER XII

THE FOOTPRINT IN THE FLOUR

SURF and wind and rising tide,— ever since that combination has been sufficient to flash me back to that September day on the weather-beaten veranda at Dune House, where, alert and tense beneath his mock invalid wrappings, George Rogers Haldayne listened to my low frightened voice.

What a contrast this, from the day that had gone before! Then I had been still skeptical, ridiculously self-sufficient. Now I poured out my heart, revealing all of its troubled and chaotic information.

George Rogers learned of the locked door on my first night at Dune House; of the silent vigil I had kept over the sand-dunes through that long warm day. He learned of the mysterious notes, of the Chinaman hidden in the little gully; of the terrible night of the death-howl and the dancing lights; he learned of everything, even of the real use to which I had put the flour and the manner in which I had sealed the bedroom doors.

At this point he interrupted my low, rapid recital with a sharp exclamation of admiration:

"Good Lord, you 're a marvelous girl! I knew it the minute I first saw those quiet, bright eyes of yours. That 's wonderfully clever, you know!"

"Balzac did it first," I disclaimed briefly.

"But there 's not another girl in the world who would have thought of it! You spunky little thing!"

The compliment spattered off of me as a sparrow spatters water. I continued a little impatiently, my voice sinking even lower. Every now and again I glanced nervously over my shoulder at the expanse of sun-flooded vacant porch which lay between us and the opened French window.

"Last night I waited until the house had settled to quietude. Hoang came upstairs the last of all, after he had blown out the lamps in the lower hall. I saw the yellow light from the lamp he carried, through the crack at the base of my door. Then it went out in darkness as he closed his door and everything was still. I had saved the flour I swept up that morning and when perhaps half an hour or so had gone by I slipped out into the hall and scattered it before Miss Haldayne's door. Then I sealed the doors of the rooms." I neglected to tell him that he had been

included in this attention and continued hastily, "Right after dinner I'd sealed the door of the secret room."

Here I shivered, despite the sun on my back, and then glared at the man as though he was to blame for this betrayal of weakness. "Nothing happened while I was sealing it!" I said almost defiantly.

"I'm unarmed!" he said in mock alarm.

I scowled at this levity and continued: "I woke early the next morning — I'd put the alarm-clock under my pillow you know. No one else was awake at that hour. I heard the clock downstairs in the sitting-room strike five when I crept into the hall. Mr. Haldayne, there was a footprint in the flour."

The man before me started and in his agitation shoved his dark glasses up on his forehead, the bright hazel eyes plunging into mine for a startled moment before he remembered his rôle and jerked them down again.

I swept on before the startled ejaculation I could see forming on his lips. "A flat, shapeless imprint; it was not made by a bare foot nor by the conventional shoe with a heel. It might have been a stockinged foot," I finished doubtfully.

"Go on! Whose —" The man's voice was hoarse with suspense. I felt that, behind the

glasses, his eyes were held by mine in an almost hypnotic spell. My own voice came more quietly now.

"There was n't a door that had been opened, Mr. Haldayne. I made sure of them all. Even on the door of the secret room the hair was undisturbed."

The young man's forehead suddenly creased with perplexity. "Good Lord!" and his tone was a peculiar mixture of testiness and amazement. "Who else is in the house — and how do they get in! I 'd suspect Hoang was admitting some one at night after every one retired, some enemy of Aunt Eliza, but you say the seal on his door was intact."

"Wait," I advised quietly. "There 's more to my story. I stood in the dim hall and stared at that patch of whiteness until it was imprinted indelibly on my mind. There was this large, shapeless print; and, Mr. Haldayne, it led *out* of the room."

I heard him gasp at that and I continued in a rapid voice:

"There were faint traces of flour leading down the hall. Near the top of the stairs they died out, showing that — something — went down the stairs in the dark. I went back to the patch and looked again. There was a fainter imprint near the outer edge leading into the room.

"I heard the alarm-clock ring in Hoang's room then, and I hurried back to my own for the paper and whisk-broom. After I 'd removed the flour I locked my door and waited for the usual hour of going downstairs. I tried to reason it out. I remembered that Hoang was the last to retire every night. I thought, as you did, that he might be admitting some one to the house; some one who lies hidden in the sand-dunes by day."

A vision of the Chinese face I had seen screened by the lupines flashed before me and involuntarily I shivered. The man's hand suddenly covered mine at the action and the warm, compelling feel of those long fingers sent a thrill tingling up my arm before I snatched my hand away, my cheeks crimsoning, to my helpless annoyance.

My tone was shaky as I continued: "I went down to the dining-room shortly after I heard Miss Haldayne's door open. Miss Drusilla is generally late for breakfast and I knew the children would n't be down for several minutes. She looked up as I came into the room — Miss Haldayne. Hoang was in the kitchen. She looked up and her eyes — Mr. Haldayne, they were lifeless! Glazed, hopeless,— eyes that can't be described. She looked like one in a trance. Her face was drawn and gray — she 's grown so much thinner and older in these last weeks! Her

voice was almost a whisper; it seemed choked. I must have cried out or stared very hard, for she nodded twice before her words came.

"'Again, this morning, Ann. Another — and, Ann, they came downstairs!'

"For the moment I thought that she had noticed the traces of flour on the hallway and my heart jumped guiltily, but before I could speak she went on:

"'The heavy curtain before the bay-window was pulled aside. Pulled aside, Ann, so they could look out on the dunes!'

"I 'm sure I cried out at that. The thought of — Something, pressing its face to the closed windows, peering out into the night, was horrifying.

"Miss Haldayne continued huddled there — huddled is the only word. Her big frame was sunk in the carpet-lined rocker, her eyes fixed so helplessly, so heavily on mine.

"When I could I spoke. 'Where 's the note?' I asked.

"Her eyes shifted at this. 'I tore it up. I destroyed it in anger.' I knew this was a lie. Undoubtedly there was something in the note, something more definite than anything that had been written so far, something she did n't want me to see.

"'Ann!' and her voice was a low wail.

'What shall I do, Ann? How in God's name do they get in?'

"I was about to tell her, Mr. Haldayne, of our suspicions of Hoang, though she probably would n't have listened, but just then we heard Miss Drusilla creaking down the stairs and that brought Miss Haldayne to her feet. She was nervous and rigid with the effort of pulling herself together, her fingers gripped my upper arm until they left bruises.

"'Not a word! Not a word about this, Ann! They must n't know. Ann, I 'm relying on you!'

"She released me then and abruptly darted into the kitchen as Miss Drusilla squeezed through the hall door. Almost as abruptly I squeezed past with some mumbled excuse about a headache.

"It seems cowardly, deserting Miss Haldayne when she needed me, but I could n't go on placidly eating oatmeal when my ears were ringing and my heart pounding. I could n't, Mr. Haldayne!"

I found that I was pleading for the man's understanding and I was not disappointed. "Of course you could n't," came decidedly. Again his hand gripped mine and this time I clung back for a moment before I gently drew away.

I gulped, and continued. "When I got up-

stairs I went directly to Miss Haldayne's room. I felt that I must find some clew to this perpetual mystery. It was beginning to prey on my nerves. I tried to reason logically. Two things alone could happen, I told myself; either Hoang lets some one in at night after the rest of the house has gone to bed, some one who has a key to Miss Haldayne's room; or — don't think I 'm melodramatic, but only this could be the solution,— some one is in the house all the time and gets into her room by some secret means.

" I recalled the old manor-houses of England and Scotland, with their secret passages, their hidden rooms, their priest-holes opening through fireplaces and swinging flagstones. But the walls here were smooth, unbroken plaster. I told myself then that there must be a trap-door; I was desperate, you see. There is a large rag carpet in Miss Haldayne's room. It 's not nailed down. I was down on my hands and knees, rolling it up from under the legs of the bed, when I suddenly noticed something. In this position my eyes were on a level with things on the floor. I got an angle on them that was lost when I stood erect. Miss Haldayne's bedroom slippers were placed primly side by side near the head of the bed, by the mopboard. They are shapeless affairs with eider-down soles. One had fallen on its side. I picked it up and sat there on my

heels staring at the slipper in my hand. It's sole was covered with flour."

In the brief silence which followed the man before me looked stunned. Even through the disguise of the glasses I could see that. When he spoke his voice held a curious hush, as though the vitality had been shocked from it.

"You mean — Aunt Eliza herself — was prowling about the house? That — that —" He floundered, overcome by the unexpectedness of it.

"Good Lord! then she 's deliberately been deceiving you! She 's running some game on you —"

I nodded, mutely miserable. Despite her peculiarities I had liked the odd woman. To feel that she had cold-bloodedly worked on my sympathy and credulity! I could not fathom it.

"But why —"

It was the same question I had been asking myself all that day. I flung out my hands helplessly. "I don't know!"

"But why in the world should she seek to deceive you? Do you think she 's writing the notes herself?"

"I don't know, Mr. Haldayne!" I repeated a trifle impatiently. "Oh, I don't know!" this last was a cry of anguish as much to myself as to him. "I can't believe it; she was really

frightened; I can tell when a person 's frightened and I tell you she was gray with fear!"

"Do you suppose some one else may be using her slippers, to turn suspicion from himself?" he asked next.

I considered it gravely. It sounded ridiculous, but we could not afford to leave any stone unturned for the mere fear for ridicule.

"I don't know what to suppose," I finally said helplessly. "I 'm all at sea. This was the last thing on earth I expected. Why, Mr. Haldayne, she seemed so frightened! — underneath, you know, as if she held herself from flying into a panic only by exercising that tremendous will of hers. And why? What 's to be gained by hoaxing *me*?" It was my turn to ask the question.

"Aunt Eliza 's a shrewd woman," put in her nephew, slowly. "Maybe she suspects you 're finding out too much. Perhaps she 's trying to scare you away."

I shook my head. "And yet when I wanted to go, that morning following the death-howl, she was reluctant to have me. There was genuine relief on her face when I said I 'd stay for the children's sake."

"And look how afraid she is of the dark. That 's not put on. Ever since I 've been here the lights have been lit as soon as daylight fades.

Hoang is always the one to put them out. I 've seen her shrink from going into the sitting-room before the light was lit, though it was still daylight. It 's as though she feared that some enemy might be hidden in the shadows."

"Then to think that she could creep downstairs in the dead of night, down into the dark front parlor! And why —" a new thought struck me —"why did she tell me about the curtain over the parlor window being disarranged? Did she suspect that I was prowling through the house at night?"

"Hoang!" we both exclaimed at once. I rushed on. "Hoang must have told her about finding the flour on the floor and she is trying to frighten me with the idea that some one is hiding in the house at night."

For the moment it almost seemed as though we were making progress; then the other baffling angle of the thing crowded upon me: "But those notes! If she 's prowling about the house playing ghost, is she writing the notes to deceive me as well?"

It was his turn to make a hopeless gesture. "I can't see what 's to be gained," he said wearily. "It seems such a stupid deception, so aimless."

We were both still for a moment. Again came the surge of the sea beating in on the ears; came

Joan's clear treble while she read a fairy tale aloud to Harry in the angle of the veranda. Somewhere from the depths of the house rose the faint sound of Miss Drusilla's whine to the universe at large regarding some apricot preserves which had gone moldy.

A memory had visualized itself before my eyes,— the remembrance of Miss Haldayne's gray face that morning as she had raised it to me in the breakfast-room, the eyes glazed, the pupils dilated over half the surface of the iris. Art could never have produced that effect; art has never yet caused skin to shrink with the dry, gray mask of fear. I burst out vehemently: "I don't believe it! There 's some other explanation, there must be! Perhaps it 's as you said; some one may be wearing her slippers to cast suspicion on her." I stopped abruptly and there was a brief silence. Then I said slowly, "Miss Drusilla hates her sister."

"How could she get into her sister's room without waking her?" very sensibly pointed out the man.

I shrugged my shoulders. It was as good as any other reply. Another long silence passed. The sun had lost its golden tinge. There was more than a hint of the coming trade-winds in the air. It was the man who broke the stillness this time. He spoke slowly, carefully, as one

who jumps from one stepping-stone of fact to another.

"It seems to me, Miss Belmont, that we 're going at this wrong. We 're letting a lot of unrelated and apparently inexplicable incidents confuse us. We 're trying to deduct a reason from its results. Deduction is futile and foolish; what we should try is elimination. Trace down these smaller puzzles, eliminate them one by one until we reach the main thread of the mystery. To take a bird's-eye view, as we 've been doing, is to go crazy! How can we guess at the connection between Miss Drusilla's hatred and the Chinaman hidden in the gully? between the death-howl and the secret door? between the mysterious notes and the flour on Aunt Eliza's slipper? Yet there must be some connection; every mystery has a key. We have to find that key. Take Hoang, for instance. He 's up to some deviltry! I don't trust him. He knows a lot we 'd like to know, but there 's no sense trying to worm it out of him. No, I 'm afraid that we 'll have to mark Hoang with an 'X' and place him with the other unknown quantities.

"Miss Drusilla? Hum-m-m. I don't like the idea of our giving her our confidence. I 'm sorry, but my dear aunt strikes me as a doodle-wit, Miss Belmont. This is your mystery and mine and it 's up to us to unravel it. I wish Florence had

given me some inkling, but she probably did n't know, herself. There 's the most maddening air of vagueness hanging about this house!" he burst out.

There was another silence during which the surf had things all to itself. My stillness appeared to nettle the young man. Suddenly he shoved the dark glasses up on his forehead and turned the battery of the hazel eyes on my face. "Say something!" he commanded irritably.

I smothered a smile, then as quickly grew grave.

"Elimination seems the sanest way, as you suggest. Let 's start on the most concrete mystery we have. It might act as a key to the rest," I added slowly. "Let 's find out what 's in the secret room."

"Excellent!" The pseudo invalid forgot his rôle and gave his legs an excited hitch. "At least that will lay one wild surmise at rest. Now when —"

"I can slip down there sometime when Miss Drusilla 's lying down and Miss Haldayne 's busy in the kitchen. I hate to try while she 's in the house, but we have to take some risk. Perhaps this afternoon or to-morrow —"

"Nothing doing!" He ripped it out curtly. "I 'm not going to have you fooling around that darned room alone."

My heart leaped at the authoritative tone, but I managed a scornful laugh. "That 's nonsense, nothing 's going to bite me."

"I 'm not so sure. Joan's description has rather unpleasantly stirred my imagination. If there are any 'shiny faces' to be encountered, Miss Belmont, I want to be in front of you with an automatic."

"Joan 's probably drawing on her inventive powers," I scoffed to offset the pink I could feel rising in my face.

"Joan did n't invent the Chinaman up the gully, nor the pistol shot and the howl in the night," the man retorted earnestly. "There is danger in this house, Miss Belmont. Promise me you won't attempt it alone."

"I 'll promise, though it 's silly. You act as though we 'd find some terrible solution, as *Jane Eyre* did, for instance. I hardly see how that is possible unless you choose to pose as *Mr. Rochester* and have a wife hidden behind the scenery." I tried to be superciliously amused, though his positive tone was a little upsetting.

"I have n't any wife — yet," he returned daringly, "so we 'll have to dismiss that theory, but I 'll tell you frankly, Miss Belmont, that room has me worried. Look here: I can't risk sneaking about the house in the daytime because of this confounded disguise, but at night, when the

others are in bed — Miss Belmont, to-night! Shall we get into that room to-night?"

All my lassitude had disappeared now. I knew the spirit of adventure shared. I could feel my cheeks blazing, felt that my eyes were burning to match the excitement of his own. But I managed to speak skeptically: "How? The door 's locked."

"You don't really suppose I came down here without a skeleton key? If it 's like the locks on the bedroom doors Joan could open it with a hairpin. Now then, every one's in bed by ten — by eleven, at the latest. We 'll wait until eleven-thirty to make sure. Half-past eleven, then count to five hundred for luck! We 'll meet at the head of the stairs at the farther end of the hall. Or maybe it will be safer for you not to come. I can carry it through alone —"

"Well, I like that! When I 've been waiting all this time —" I was beginning indignantly when his hand suddenly flashed up and jerked the dark glasses to their proper position again.

I wheeled on the instant. Hoang stood not far behind us. In his usual kitty-catting way he had stepped to the veranda through the opened French window and approached us from the rear. His eyes were obsequiously fastened on the ground; he appeared not to have seen those tell-tale glasses shoved high on George Rogers's fore-

head, but my heart had turned icy. There was an edge to my voice when I asked him why he was there.

Hoang's ears were sharp, this I knew. If he had just approached he had probably been unable to glean a word, but — how long had he been standing there, unsuspected by us?

The narrow eyes rose slowly to mine. Through their almost stupid docility I thought I glimpsed a mocking devil; a brazen, defiant devil.

"Missy Haldayne, she say come, help fix 'em skirt. She down in sitting-room."

It was true. A few days before I had promised Miss Haldayne to help her hang a skirt that afternoon — a process by no means as bloodthirsty as it sounds. There was nothing for it save to rise and follow the soft-stepping Celestial down the porch. Yet as he turned his back my hand was caught and held by strong fingers for a brief moment. Even the dark glasses could not hide the anxiety of hazel eyes that signaled, "Careful!" while the silent lips framed, "Remember!"

CHAPTER XIII

IN THE NIGHT

TO my guilty fancy the old clock in the sitting-room appeared to strike eleven-thirty with malevolent clearness. There was a tinge of alarm to its clamor; each cog-wheel seemed hysterically insisting that the household awake and give its attention. It was more a clarion call to arms than an announcement of the hour of rest for Dune House.

For perhaps two minutes I stood in the dark, resting my forehead against the door-jamb; then with painful care I slowly turned the knob and let myself out into the hall.

The moon was honoring us with her presence that night. White pools of light lay in the hollowed scoop of the stairs and trembled on the worn floor boards. Through the far window I could see the dunes stretching away interminably, blue-white billows, under the unwinking orb. This, however, was in the front of the house. The back of the hall, the stairs toward

which I was stealing my way, were draped in plushy blackness.

It seemed an unending time that I was groping my way blindly along the passage. My tongue was cleaving dryly to the roof of my mouth; each nerve was stretched painfully tense.

"Ann!"

I more sensed than heard the soft whisper in the darkness. My outstretched fingers brushed something tangible, then they were clasped in George Rogers's firm grip. I had reached the head of the stairs.

Without communication other than that warm clasp, we continued to steal down the stairs, the man first, automatic drawn; I trailing behind him with the electric torch he had handed me, tightly clutched in my cold, dry hand.

We passed the gray rectangle of window, stooping low to avoid presenting a silhouette, lest sleepless eyes be watching from the upper hall; made the sharp turn, and felt our way to the lower landing. Here the darkness seemed so thick as to be almost tangible. It lay upon us an unsupportable weight; it was brooding, uncanny, a menace as much as a protection. Only our outstretched finger-tips told when we had reached the door of the secret room. George Rogers was in advance. I stopped by bumping into him.

For a breathless moment we waited, heads atilt toward the stairs overhead, lest a creak of our progress had betrayed us. Unknown to the man one hand of mine remained outstretched, lightly touching his sleeve. The rough feel of the cloth was indescribably comforting when taken in connection with the fact that but a few inches of wood separated us from what Joan had disturbingly described as "something all shiny, like a terrible face."

The silence was so deep that it rang in our ears. The tide was out; the surge of the water came from very far away, we might have been miles within the earth so far as other evidence to the senses was concerned.

After what seemed an eternity I felt the man stir; felt his right hand move toward his pocket; the other, I knew, still held the automatic.

"The light," he breathed close to my face.

The beam which leaped out at the pressure of my finger was uncomfortably bright. As it splashed across the dark shiny wood of the door and came to a wavering focus on the keyhole I had the unpleasant conviction that it attracted myriads of unseen eyes from the dark to watch us. George Rogers's hand came within its arc, grasping the skeleton key, moved toward the knob; then abruptly the light winked out and

my other hand had shot to his wrist and clung there in silent agony.

"What?" came his startled whisper.

For the moment I did not answer, just clung frantically, eyes and ears painfully alert in the blackness. I had to moisten my lips first when I did reply, my words breathed close to his ear:

"I don't know — for sure. I did n't hear anything but — I seemed to *feel* it! Hark!"

Again that paralyzing interval of silence during which we remained motionless, every sense strained. Five minutes perhaps went by in this maddening inactivity; five centuries of heart-breaking uncertainty before I drew a long, quivering breath and my hand dropped from that warm, pulsing wrist.

"It was nothing, I guess."

I could feel by the sway of his body that the man had turned his head, that it was inclined, listening, to the door behind us. Beyond that door there was no sound. The hall stretched grimly in front of us.

The light flashed into being once more and directed itself to the keyhole. The skeleton key sought for the lock, found it, then was as abruptly withdrawn with a little rasp that seemed as though it filed across my raw nerves. Again the light winked out, and this time there

was no exclamation. We had both heard it,—an alien noise somewhere up there in the front of the house. An unexplainable noise; a noise which we knew was never created by wind or wave.

I found my knuckles painfully crushed in George Rogers's fingers, felt my damp hair stir with his breath as he whispered: "There 's someone up in the front, I think. I 'm going to have a look."

With the last word he began cautiously feeling his way forward; I promptly imitating him, my leashed breath not knowing whether to come out in a gasp or be swallowed in a gulp.

Around the bend in the wall the coal-shoot darkness surrendered to the advance-guard of the moonlight. Things took on a gray tinge. I could see the dark bulk of the man just before me.

We stopped twice to listen, flattened there against the wall, eyes strained to the menace ahead, ears sharpened by fear, stockinged feet poised to flee whichever way alarm gave the signal. Each time the silence reassured us and we resumed our stealthy stalking through the grayness. We passed the dark cavern of the little sitting-room with its door ajar. The thin shaft of an investigating moonbeam suddenly thrust itself through the parlor entrance to tremble on

the edge of the lowest hall stair. I became aware of an acute surprise that the door should be open at all. Save on cleaning days it was kept religiously closed, a New England custom transplanted bodily to this western dwelling. Then my heart contracted painfully and once more my knuckles were crushed in the man's hand. A slight sound came from the front room, a brushing sound, as of a body passing close to the wall, the thin shaft of moonlight was blotted out for the moment by a shadow.

I was grateful then for the strong pressure of that hand, for my head reeled, a cold hand rudely gripped my heart. During the next few seconds the moon-dappled hall swam before my sick eyes; then with a gallant roar the blood pounded back and I was cognizant of my surroundings.

It was again ominously still in the front room. After what seemed an eon of inactivity I felt my hand released with a reassuring squeeze and my guide moved forward. My feet automatically did the same and moving silently as shadows among shadows we came abreast of the open parlor door.

It was very dark in there, and very still. Our eyes, used by now to the thin grayness of the hall, could make nothing of the gloom, beyond where it was cleft by that fitful beam of moonlight, but this we followed up to its source. It sloped

between the dark velvet window hangings pulled ajar! It sloped over and around a black bulk half draped by the curtain on each side — some one standing back toward us, I felt instinctively, his face flattened to the glass of the locked window where it looked over the moon-flooded sand-dunes.

The silence was leaden; I found that I had forgotten to breathe. I feared that the concentration of our gaze would wheel the peering figure to the spot where we stood, tense, against the hall, yet my eyes were powerless to tear themselves away. Then the beam of moonlight broadened; the figure had turned; the next moment the white light blinked out in blackness as the curtains swung together and through the inky darkness of the parlor we could hear the soft brush of feet on the carpet.

That fearful inertia would have chained me there to be discovered had not my arm been suddenly gripped in a warm clasp. I was half carried into the ambush of the thick shadows farther up the hall, swept along and held in the firm circle of an arm which was all that saved my cowardly knees from giving way beneath me.

The soft scuffling came louder to our ears, a board squeaked in the hall just outside the parlor. We could barely make the figure out,— a grayness hardly darker than the grayness which

surrounded it. Nothing in the whole dim scene appeared to have solidity; it was all a sea of half-light, and the sound of its surf was the ringing of silence in our ears.

A small eternity elapsed, then from behind came a low, menacing whir. I started in that protecting embrace, but I did not scream and the next moment a hot wave of relief overflooded the back of my neck, leaving me weak. The grandfather clock in the sitting-room was striking twelve.

The long strokes died out in the upper reaches of the house, the cog-wheels slipped back into place with a little jar, silence closed over our heads again; then up there in the shadows the gray figure stirred. Came the soft scuffling once more, a stair creaked under a weight, the prowler, whoever it was, was about to make a nocturnal visit to the upper hall.

I was both relieved and chilled. The arm about me loosened a trifle and we moved forward with one accord. The window in the bend of the stairs would reveal the intruder even as it had once revealed the man who now stood my ally. The moonlight lay in a white pool on the half-way landing, it glanced in high lights off the spindle-shaped balusters and painted the dark duplicate on the lighted square of plaster wall opposite. A portion of the lighted rec-

tangle was blotted out; the figure toiling upward paused, back to us, and suddenly flattened its face against the hall window, as it had against the one in the parlor.

It was a woman. The disheveled hair stood out in wild silhouette about her head. The body was swathed in the voluminous folds of some heavy garment. I felt that I gasped. As if that light sound had penetrated to her, the figure suddenly wheeled and remained tensely poised. The moon sharply illuminated that listening face. The man beside me stiffened and I gasped again. It was Miss Haldayne. But what a Miss Haldayne! Between the rumpled twists of her iron-gray hair her face peered, harshly outlined; the black eyes were wild and watchful.

For perhaps a moment the three of us held the tableau. The man and I were sick with dread lest those wild black eyes would pierce the shadows of the lower hall and see the white patches of our faces against the plaster wall. The strained expression gradually faded,— we could see this, even in the moon's uncertain light, — then a change more terrible, more inexplicable passed over it. The familiar features took on an expression I had never seen them wear. They lit as though shining by the light of a wild inward glee, an almost ferocious cunning. Gone was the

iron self-control, the unconscious appeal, or — the expression I liked best to see them assume — the stamp of grim humor I had known. The same features, but how changed! It was as though some diabolical overgrown child had stolen the mask of Eliza Haldayne's plain, efficient face.

The next minute the moonlit area was empty, the figure had been swallowed up in the blackness of the upper stairs. Terrified surprise kept us chained in the shadows. We heard the creak of the board we had learned to avoid in the upper hall and then, full of meaning to our overstrained ears, the soft introduction of a key in a door lock, recognized more by our nerves than by our hearing.

"God!" I heard the whisper of the man beside me and he tightened his clasp. I found that I had been drawn into his arms, that the physical contact was full of unutterable relief, that I clung to him frantically, my hair pressed against his cheek while he patted one shoulder reassuringly with his free hand. Nor was I at all daunted by the discovery. Conventions had no place that night in that dark house with its nerve-racking mysteries.

"What does it mean? What can it mean?" I demanded in a frightened whisper. I was dazed by what I had just seen; fancy was darting

hither and thither in a frenzied attempt to find some explanation. In that brief space I had found time to consider the wild theory that the place harbored a fantastic twin sister of the woman. But reason rejected this. Despite the absence of the usual self-control, despite the abandon in the features of the disheveled figure, it was undoubtedly Miss Haldayne herself.

The man's whisper was grim when it reached my ears. "I don't know, but by God I 'm going to, to-morrow! I 'm through with mystery. There 's going to be a thorough explanation."

"From Miss Haldayne?"

I felt his nod in the dark.

A long moment passed while I could almost see the wild surmises passing through our minds. I finally drew a long, quivering breath. "I can't — seem to believe it!" My whisper broke.

His own came very warm and close to my ear. "Poor little girl! You poor little tired, spunky thing! This confounded house has worn you out."

This brought me to the realization that he was still patting my shoulder, while his other arm pressed me tightly to him. Common sense began to dictate and I drew away with as much dignity as I could summon with shaking fingers tucking up my hair.

"I don't want to explore the secret room to-

night!" I quavered like a scared child, as Joan herself might have done. "I want to go to bed!"

And indeed the one place I fervently desired to be was in my own room, the bedclothes securely pulled over my head.

"Ann — listen — dear —"

His whisper was guarded but intense. It brought a warm glow to my cold cheeks, not unpleasant after the chill of fear they had known, but I had had enough of emotion that night. Noiselessly I broke from his clasp and darted to the stairs. My foot was on the first one when I stopped, frozen into immobility, my face tilted up to the shadows. On to the patch of moonlit landing slid the figure of Hoang, chin outthrust as he peered down toward me in the gloom.

I know now that it could only have been a few seconds that I stood there, feeling the blood drain from my almost stilled heart, but it seemed then to be an eternity of torture. It was long enough, in all events, for several things to flash into my over-alert brain. Had Hoang heard the sound of our voices? Had it been that which disturbed him? It was hardly plausible, we had barely heard them ourselves, close as we had stood. Was he prowling about the house on uncanny business of his own, or was our venturesome expedition known to him? If it was, George

Rogers's disguise was completely pierced; still, on the other hand, it might have been that creak upstairs which had wakened him; some slight noise of Miss Haldayne's passing. Then our best plan was to hide.

I had placed one backthrust arm against George Rogers's chest and by his quick retreat to the shadows near the sitting-room door I knew that he had leaped to the same conclusion. Praying that my moving figure might not be conspicuous in the surrounding grayness, I was following suit, when my heart leaped painfully to action and my knees threatened to give way beneath me.

The Chinaman bent still farther forward, I saw the moonlight glitter on the whites of his eyes, narrowed to the merest slips in an effort to concentrate. His voice floated sibilantly down through the shadows:

"Missy Belmont — you there?"

Amid the sick reeling which the moon-splashed hall took on, I tried to keep my head. I could feel the man behind me gather himself as though for a spring and I gave him my most vicious backward thrust. Time enough to spring to the rescue when a rescue was needed. Until then, the sight of a paralytic man walking required more explanations than we felt inclined to make.

There was nothing more to be gained by con-

cealment. Hoang must have been very sure of me to call my name. I answered in a voice which wabbled painfully: "Yes, Hoang. Did I wake you?"

I stepped forward boldly as I said this, aware that the man in the shadows behind me was an unwilling follower of my silent advice. I could picture him, tensely alert, the automatic trained on the unwitting figure of the Oriental on the landing.

I advanced up the stairs boldly enough, my outward demeanor giving no inkling of my shaking limbs; but I was rather at a loss when the Chinaman remained planted squarely across my path. His face and neck projected almost belligerently from the collar of a hastily flung-on coat. The black, sharp shadows made his cheekbones appear abnormally high; his eyes were glittering slits opening pocket-like in the flat face.

Their cold venom made me pause quite as much as his form blocking my way. They held my own with a terrible steadiness, as on that morning in the breakfast-room. I felt my hands and feet grow cold; there was an unpleasant singing in my ears as though I had taken too much quinine; the darkness seemed closing in about me with a roar.

I tore my mind away from the control of his

as if by a physical effort, felt my thoughts hurl themselves back to the comforting realization of George Rogers standing behind me with a blessedly real automatic. With this a grateful burst of warmth came over my chilled body; my heart received a new gush of courage.

As though sensing the mental resistance the Chinaman capitulated. He spoke in a dull, sulky voice:

"Why you come down here?"

"I heard a shutter creaking and I could n't sleep," I lied promptly. The explanation was clumsy, but the only one which came readily.

Again the black venom of that gaze held me. There had been no wind to-night. His voice was heavy with meaning when it finally came, ominously slow.

"I think no good to walk at night. Once I tell you. Now I tell again. You stay in your room, Missy Belmont, I think so."

He made a sudden quick movement and my heart fainted within me; but it had only been to move aside on the landing to allow me a grudging foot or two in which to pass. I could feel the hatred of his stare as I did so, his head turning slowly to keep me ever in full view. There was a heart-sickening moment while my skirts brushed his rigid body, then I continued on up the stairs, my back prickling with the disturbing

knowledge that he had turned and was silently following a few paces behind.

No further word was spoken; we made our noiseless way up the hall. At his own door Hoang paused, but I knew that he was standing rigid in the dark hall waiting for the click which would tell that I had entered my room.

The knob did click as I released it and turned the key in the lock, but I remained just on the other side in the same position, my cold wet forehead pressed against the crack, my ears strained to catch something other than the frightened beating of my own heart.

It was long after — very long after, indeed, it seemed — that I caught the sound for which I had been waiting. The dream of a hand brushed across the panels of the door, there was the faint release of a lock in the night. George Rogers had reached his own room in safety. And only then did I relax.

CHAPTER XIV

MORE THINGS IN HEAVEN AND EARTH —

I AWOKE to a strange feeling of unrest, to an imperative need for haste, for which I was at a loss to account. I lay stupidly blinking at the plaster ceiling until a door banged sharply downstairs. That told of some one's presence, though by the light of the fog-filled square of window I judged it to be much earlier than my usual rising-hour.

That curious sense of alertness continued. The old house seemed uneasy; the very air was electric, pregnant with possibilities. The corners of the room seemed to crowd toward the center. I felt nervous, smothered. Scarcely knowing why, I slipped to the floor and ran to the window. The next moment found me, face and palms flattened against the cold wire mesh, strained eyes staring ahead to the exotic growth sprung by our dreary little beach in the night.

The fog was lifting, dissipated by the dawn wind. On all sides the water appeared to be steaming, and amid the fog wraiths, now

shrouded by their ragged wisps, now half revealed as a current of air lifted them for a brief moment, rocked the strangest craft that had ever nosed its way into the dismal little bay.

Time might have turned back four centuries. The ship was not unlike an old Spanish galleon, jutting high fore and aft. Her one mast had a crazy tilt forward; an enormous oar extended out at one side, like the lame flipper of a lobster. So high she rode that one looked with each oily swell to see her turn turtle, but always she righted herself, like a piece of cork bobbing on the surface of the water. She did this now, swinging half about with the turn of the tide. The growing wind blew the last obscuring mesh of fog clear and on each side of her bow I saw painted an enormous red eye, glaring inland.

The sloping beach had sprung a new growth amid its jelly-fish and brown kelp. It fairly swarmed with fantastic creatures,— brown, lithe, half-naked figures scrambling over the dunes on skinny bare legs; squatting on their heels about small crackling fires of driftwood; a few standing ankle-deep in the little creek seeping through the sand, as they dipped up the water in rusty tins. They raced like monkeys over the wet sand, seemingly indifferent to the chill wind which was blowing the bunch-grass. Grouped in jabbering masses, they shaded their eyes and pointed skinny

forefingers at the great silent house staring blankly back at them. From my high vantage-point they were unpleasantly like a mass of larvæ squirming busily in the lap of the dunes. Their shrill voices carried to me in a high singsong on the fitful gusts of wind.

Never before had I laid eyes on such spawn; yet the high-riding junk behind and the shrilly flung voices served to identify them. They were Chinese,— not the placid Han Ren with which the Pacific coast of this country has grown so familiar, but a type which was almost aboriginal; undersized, ape-like beings with matted black hair falling in filthy confusion beneath enormous basket hats.

A million wild conjectures fought in my dazed brain as I pulled my clothes on with shaking hands. Were these the mysterious "They" referred to in the threatening notes? What part did Hoang play in this? Was it for this ship, long expected, that he had been silently slipping downstairs last night, only to confront me in the hall?

Not stopping to pin up the hair flying in brown confusion about my shoulders, I ran out into the hall. Now indeed I heard the commotion which had caused that uneasiness in my sleep. Hurrying steps sounded on the bare boards of the lower hall. Doors banged, a window-shutter was

slammed in the rear of the house and its lock screeched into place. Harry began to cry and, turning to enter the children's room, I came face to face with George Rogers, not disguised this morning as the paralytic invalid but somehow startlingly tall seen upright for the first time in daylight. His eyes were innocent of dark glasses, his mouth was grim, amazingly like his aunt's in that moment.

He hurried down the hall to me. "You 've seen it? The junk? And those yellow vermin swarming over the beach. Ann, we 're about due for that explanation, I think."

"Wait for me, I must quiet the children." I was secretly proud of the calmness of my tone.

He was reassuringly close as I entered the room. Harry, plastered at the window in his cotton pajamas, gulped down a sob and joined Joan in staring in round-eyed wonder at the amazing sight of their cousin walking, and without the dark glasses. For the moment this served completely to overshadow the disturbing sights of the beach below the window.

I hustled the children into their bath-robes, for the room was cold with dawn, and gave them a few hurried orders as I did so.

"You 're not to leave this room, neither you nor Harry; Joan, promise me that. We 'll be right downstairs, your cousin and I, and we 'll

take care of you the first of all. Promise you 'll stay here."

Between teeth that chattered with fright and chill Joan promised, then quavered: "But, Miss Belmont, why are they there? They 're Chinamen, are n't they? Why do they look so funny?"

"I don't know," I answered truthfully enough, shaking small arms into refractory sleeves. "Maybe they just came in to get water. Anyway, there 's nothing to be afraid of, you know."

Adult company had bolstered Harry's martial spirit. "Ho!" he gave out belligerently, "*I 'm* not afraid, Joan. Boys are n't afraid, never!" This in the light of the fat round tears not yet dried on his small cheeks! "If they come up here I 'll shoot 'em with my pop-gun. Bang!"

We left the small warrior and his sister, in not unpleasurable excitement watching our weird visitors through a slit in the shutters, and hurried down the stairs, those same stairs up which I had crept trembling a few hours before.

Midway of the lower hall Miss Haldayne suddenly swooped out of the dim back parlor and came flying toward us. The faint red light slanting through the side panels of the front door struck full on her advancing figure and unconsciously I fell back a step. This was the Miss Haldayne of the night before. Any doubt I may

have harbored that it had been her we had seen on the moonlit landing was dissipated.

Her hair, ever before so rigidly immaculate, stood out in a stiff gray halo about her head, her black eyes were wild — more than that, unseeing. They galloped over my companion without appearing to register the amazing fact of his walking, then came back to me like a steel to the magnet. I felt the absolute panic of the woman.

"They 've come, Ann! The notes were right; they knew, Ann! They knew! It could n't be hid. It called and they came. Here!"

I recoiled as she suddenly thrust a hand out at me. It held a revolver.

"Here!" she repeated with a touch of the old asperity. "There 's Hoang and I for the front of the house. You two guard the side. The back and east 's safe enough for a time, if we keep 'em bottled up on the beach. Drusilla 's to stay with the children and to keep out from under my feet. She 's always had the soul of a lizard, I despise her! Let her crawl to cover now! Here."

Again the revolver was shaken impatiently, this time in the direction of George Rogers.

"One moment, Aunt Eliza," the man's voice came with comforting firmness. "We 'll have to know what we 're fighting for before we do it. Ann and I have an explanation coming."

"Ha!" For the first time she appeared really to see him. Her eyes stared glassily for a moment, appearing to focus with difficulty; then she gave a short dry laugh. "So you can walk and you 're not blind. That has some meaning, I suppose, or else you are a very personal devil. What 's one more or less, if they 're on our side? It does n't matter if you can shoot. Ann 's here. Ann has brains!"

The door of the front parlor suddenly burst open and Hoang appeared in the doorway.

"Missy Haldayne, come — look, look! They come." His eyes, blazing with excitement, wider than I had ever seen them, fell on our incongruous little group. It was the first time I had seen Hoang really betray surprise. As his gaze took in the supposed paralytic, his jaw dropped, a stupefied amazement froze his features. Truly George Rogers's disguise had been effectual.

Miss Haldayne, unheeding his stupefaction, sprang to the red panel of the front door and pressed her face against it for a moment, wheeling almost immediately.

"The yellow swine!" She fairly spat it out. "A truce, they want, do they! I 'll show them! I 'll truce them!" She suddenly raised the pistol and darted to the front room, aiming through the window. George Rogers, quite as quick,

gripped her wrist and the shot rang through the ceiling.

"Not on a flag of truce! no, by God! No matter who carries it!" he panted as the frantic woman struggled in his arms.

I stared fearfully through the shutters.

The scene on the beach had changed with theatric suddenness. The invaders were gathered in a disordered, ragged group between the creek and the house, yellow faces turned to us, blinking black eyes squinting through the growing morning light. The chill wind blew their single garments of blouse and ragged jeans about their skinny bodies and swept the coarse black hair in dirty mats from their shoulders. The only comparison I could make was to a cageful of filthy and amazing apes huddled together, staring and chattering in half-hysterical expectation.

Behind them, an astonishing back-drop, the incongruous junk rode the gray bay, the one red eye visible as the craft swung broadside appearing to stare inland with baleful intent.

Directly before us, advancing along the sandy straggling path with a slow steadiness which was not entirely devoid of a fantastic dignity, came two figures holding aloof a splinter of bamboo from the top of which floated a rag of dirty white. One was dressed in the same loose blouse and jeans as adorned the jabbering crew

in the background. His stature was perhaps half a head taller than his fellows as an average, his head, innocent of the usual basket hat, showed the coarse black hair growing close down on the sloping forehead, where it shaded the small blinking eyes and the outjutting lower portion of his face. His was the bearing of a chief, of the captain of the unsavory crew so intently watching him.

His companion's appearance told that he held a different office of authority. His head was shaved, the undiffused light causing his face to screw itself into a knot in a supreme attempt to shade his unprotected eyes. Instead of blouse and jeans he wore a straight cotton robe of slate gray which fell unbroken in line or color to his bare feet, encased in heavy rope sandals. He was very old; the yellow skin was stretched tightly over skull and cheek-bones; the neck was a shrunken bunch of shriveled cords seemingly incapable of supporting the weight of the head. As the lips twisted away from the yellow teeth in the effort to concentrate, the effect was disturbingly reminiscent of a grinning death's-head.

As the sound of the shot rang out they paused abruptly, the dirty white rag trembling hesitantly aloof. A shrill clamor of alarm had broken out from the huddled groups watching from the creek.

George Rogers turned on Hoang, who had swiftly and as silently as ever trailed us to the parlor.

"Tell them to stop right where they are," he snapped. "Damn it! I want to find some solid ground here!"

There was a tense moment while the Oriental stared defiantly back at the new master who had so determinedly grasped the helm. Rebellion glinted between his narrowed lids, but something in the white man's face finally induced him to turn sullenly, fling back one shutter, and bark out a string of Cantonese.

The effect of this was to hold the action outside the window suspended. Then George Rogers turned grimly on his aunt.

"What do they want?" he demanded shortly.

She tore her eyes from the scene before her with a visible effort and stared at him vacantly for a moment before his words appeared to penetrate to her overwrought brain.

"Something here in the house that they are n't going to get!" she replied harshly and with something like her old authority. "That which cannot be hid! Huh!" Her laugh grated. "There 'll be none to hide it from after to-day. The one who wrote the notes knew — whoever he was. Why are we wasting time?" She suddenly burst out passionately. "Shoot 'em now,

while we have the chance, the yellow swine! One for Tai Loy and one for the blind beggar of Han T'sin! Vengeance is mine! It 's come to that finally, and the mercy of the Lord will uphold us!"

He grasped her by the broad shoulders, did George Rogers, forcing the wild black eyes to look into his.

"We 'll not help you, Ann or I, until you 've enlightened us. They 're asking for a truce. Have Hoang call to them that we 'll deal with them in an hour, when the shadow of the house reaches the base of the great dune. In the meantime, you tell us what we 're supposed to fight for."

For a brief moment they held the tableau. I sensed the almost physical conflict of one tremendous will battling with the other. In the end it was the defiant black eyes which fluttered from the steady stare of the hazel ones. Miss Haldayne moved toward the window, but she did not impress Hoang as interprèter. Instead, she sent a defiant shout ringing to the motionless two entrenched behind the improvised flag of truce. One felt the hiss of hate through the cadence of it, understood the rigidly uncompromising attitude of those figures out there on the sand. Instinctively my eyes sought the profile of Hoang peering between the shutters.

The placid docility had rolled up from it as a curtain rolls. With an instinctive recoil I saw that despite the difference that cleanliness lent, despite the close-cropped hair and the immaculate linen coat Hoang's face was one with those of the matted savages grouped on the beach. His eyes were half shut over a glittering ferocity, his broad nostrils quivered, his upper lip was curled back in a soft snarl as he waited for the reply of the two below the window.

It came finally, abruptly dying out in the surge of the incoming tide.

Miss Haldayne turned on us with a short, harsh laugh.

"You want an explanation. You 'll get it. Hoang, stay here and guard the house. Shoot any one who puts a foot this side of the creek. Come on," she flung over her shoulder at us.

In silence we followed her from the room and down the hall. I saw with a suddenly pounding heart that we were headed for the secret room under the stairs.

George Rogers reached back and took my cold hand in a reassuring clasp as she unlocked the door and abruptly flung it open. It was well he did so, for my sudden backward lunge bade fair to upset us both. From the dark interior of the room a figure seemed to leap to sudden life at the inlet of light; a bloated, shining face leered

at us; two gleaming eyes, red as blood, burned through the dark; thin lips twisted in angry frenzy from tightly clenched white teeth.

Even George Rogers took an instinctive backward step, then his grip tightened comfortingly.

"Brace up, Ann," he whispered as he half lifted me over the threshold. "It is n't alive."

Miss Haldayne found her way unerringly through the gloom and unfastened a shutter, flinging it back against the wall with a defiant slam.

The white shaft of daylight which darted in fell broadly across the thing in the center of the room and it immediately crackled into a thousand rainbow shooting prisms of light — an idol, indescribably ugly, indescribably bejeweled. A short, squat body with crouching, deformed legs and a horrible flat, life-sized face, shining ebony and ivory, sea-green jade and jade of priceless white, literally incrusted with gems that flashed and scintillated wickedly in that honest shaft of daylight.

Perhaps four feet high, it seemed to tower above the plain black walnut table on which it had been incongruously placed. There was nothing else in the room, nothing about the cell-like white plaster walls to distract the eye from its hideous splendor. The imagination was stunned before the glare of cunning ferocity carved on the

ebony face. One's gaze clung, helplessly entangled in the dazzle of light. There was none of the usual cheap gilt and lacquer of the average Chinese idol about this. The jade of its towering headdress was pierced and fretted into an unbelievable lacework of carving — jade whose test is its inability to be scratched! Drapery, wrought of gold leaf and thousands of softly gleaming seed-pearls, hung about the deformed limbs, the folds traced by the delicate embroidery of gold inlay. Twin fortunes gleamed from the inflated nostrils, where two regal Oriental emeralds were set, flashing like the depths of sunlit sea water. Two more fortunes gleamed from beneath the beetling brows, where a king's ransom in Burma rubies was embedded.

They compelled the attention, those deep-red eyes. In the carved hollow sockets they smoldered with uncanny life. I felt my gaze drawn to them to linger helplessly, fascinated by the steady glare. I was aware of a fretful desire to look away, to turn my eyes anywhere — anywhere save into those twin red beams. Deep within me was born panic when I found I could not obey my will. My gaze plunged deep into their glowing hearts,— miles deep, as one looks miles deep into a glowing coal. Distances undreamed of came to view, I reached one seeming boundary only to plunge through its burning

crust to another vista of light held within. The eyes began to grow, they enlarged and encompassed me. It was as though I stood on the brink of a vast and glowing shaft that plunged to uncanny depths beyond human sight. On each side a flash of blackness suddenly hummed and spun, now closing in with a roar, now retreating with the sound of a faint ringing.

From far away, from very far away indeed, I heard a voice curiously like — and unlike — Miss Haldayne's — hard, mocking. It seemed to be shouting with stupendous effort to reach my swooning consciousness, yet it was no more than a stirring whisper in the midst of that singing roaring.

"There it is,— That Which Cannot be Hid. It called to them and the spawn of the Yellow Wolf came to take their red idol back to its empty Dragon Shrine!"

A far ball of light had dawned in the heart of the red glow, a mere pin-prick of light at first, but growing with impossible speed, rushing toward me, golden-red and dazzling, spinning on its axis, hurtling forward madly. Blazing fissures of infinite depth wormed open and closed on its amazing surface, as though by insufferable heat. My eyeballs were scorched, dried of grateful moisture; I tried to close the lids, tried frantically. The roaring deepened in my ears; it be-

came the sound of gigantic waterfalls. They fell on the frantically spinning sphere, fell with a hissing that caused the nerves to shrink, terrified. There was a blinding flash that stabbed my brain with pain; the world reeled madly in palpitating waves of red that shook into blackness more terrifying than the burning glow had been, then a thick gray cloud that rose curtain-like in intolerable stillness.

CHAPTER XV

TAI LOY

THERE is nothing to tell where the grim, blazing clay wastes end and the grim blazing sky begins. On all sides the desert stretches to a seeming cloudland of eternity,— hard yellow-gray layers and benches and flattened ridges undercut and abraded by the wind, each less apparent to the sight the farther it recedes from the gaze, until the vast choppy floor flattens out to a deceptive smoothness and loses itself in the distant haze.

The eyeballs ache with its vastness, it is a veritable planet of desolation. Over it straggle gaunt montane skeletons of hills, wasted relics of sliding shingle innocent of one blade of grass. For hundreds of miles the dreary abrasions of saline clay swell to the horizon without a break in their monotony, so that the unfortunate natives of the waste call it *Tynghiri* — which means "Sky." It might better be called Limbo. It is the end of all things, the dreary outer region which rims the pit of Hades. It is a land which

once lived but that is now dead and forsaken, the place of long-forgotten things, the Garden of Proserpine.

The faint, indelible marks of life which remain are more dreary than stark sterility would be. There are salt-stained depressions, traces of ancient shore-lines, remains of shells embedded in the clay; there are belts of dead poplars, patches of dead tamarisks, extensive beds of withered reeds rattling eerily when the wind passes over them — all of these on top of the *jardangs,* never in the wind-etched furrows; there are ripple-marks on the leeward side of clay terraces and in wind-sheltered coigns,— all telling of the former existence of fresh-water lakes long since gone.

Only a few miserable oases now remain,— straggling groups of scrubby poplars struggling hard not to die; bushes of saxual; tamarisks, their roots elevated on little mounds of earth which their fibers have jealously held from the wind that scoops the ground from about them. Here live a few wild camels, drab lizards, a few hares and dismal croaking crows.

Spring, which to greener, more favored countries means rejuvenation, brings terrific winds to this outcast land. They sweep the stretches clear of sand, charging the air so thickly with dust that a yellow pall of desolation hangs over

the gasping face of the desert and its few miserable dwellers cover their heads from the dreaded burans. The sand eventually piles in gigantic dunes that choke the eastern edge of the desert,—great dunes shaped like horseshoes and towering from thirty to three hundred feet high. They scurry before the never-relenting winds like living things, ridiculously immense and clumsy, traveling over a hundred and sixty feet in a year, moving forward inevitably, mounting as if on one another's shoulders, sometimes topping their immensity by still a third tier,—giants imbued with grotesque life.

This is the Desert of Lop, the dread heart of the mysterious Gobi.

Here, two thousand years ago, lived the Shanshani, who founded the state of Lou-lau and left the crumbled ruins of their principal town to tell their story. Here dwelt the dread Hun-yu, those fierce ancestors of Attila. From here came the Uighur tribes and the rulers of the Tangut kingdom; and here, in the sixth century, the Turks gathered strength for their descent on Christendom. Six hundred years later, as though by divine retribution, Jenghiz Khan drew away the peoples of the region. The wells dried up, trees drooped and withered, life gasped and died, and the pall of silence fell on the face of the land. It became a desert.

Now only nomad tribes breast the fierce wind and brave the brazen glare of the sun. In the dismal oases they have built miserable settlements and they eke out a meager existence by raising a few crops along the seeping waterholes, and by riding in robber bands to prey on the caravans which skirt the edge of their grim country.

No one — no one, that is, who by God's grace had ever known a happier land,— could conceive of a human willingly clinging to such a place. Yet the heart of the woman who stood in the blaze of late afternoon, on the edge of the dirty village of Han T'sin, staring at the whirling dust-cloud in the distance, raged within her and her fingers vindictively crushed into a paper ball the letter which to another would have spelled freedom.

She was like the country, this woman. Like it, she was grim and gray. Like it, she appeared to have been swept clean,— swept by the winds of life which had blown away all but one grim, deep-embedded purpose. It had furrowed her face, scarred her soul, as the vertical faces of the clay ridges were furrowed and scarred. Bleak, uncompromising, capable of fits of passionate wrath as the desert was capable of the dread dust-storms, an iron-visaged woman,— and she was a white woman.

Her stormy black eyes were finally withdrawn from the moving dust-cloud which had blown itself into a thin ghost and she smoothed out the paper in her palm, to resume her reading at the point where in her anger she had crumpled it:

And so, my dear Miss Haldayne, though we appreciate your zeal in thus choosing the heart of the desert in which to carry the Good Word to these benighted natives, it seemed for the best that you should go to other fields.

The mission funds will not permit of the continued expense of a worker where the population does not seem to warrant it. We are sending a bearer with money and camels from Nanking. Please report at headquarters when you reach here, in order to ascertain your future work. It will probably be necessary to send you to America on business. . . .

At this point the paper was convulsively crushed again and the woman's face, a grim mask, was again turned toward the now settling dust-cloud.

Her mind groped back over the years since she came to Han T'sin, crouching beneath its dreary dying poplars. Squalid, monotonous years they had been, yet somehow filled with a strange peace. Here her restless spirit had been soothed to something like quiet; here the gnawing envy which had tortured her had grown dormant. Personal danger; a never-sleeping watchfulness; the stupendous effort of swaying these children

of superstition and ignorance to Christianity, of grappling spiritually with their pagan priests for their souls, of maintaining a stern, almost masculine grip on affairs, and patiently, with a cunning almost equal to their own, forcing herself into power in the village,— all this had left little time in which to brood. And now Fate was hurling her back among her own kind, back among men whom she hated and women whom she despised.

A figure slipped from the door of one of the huts of sun-baked brick and, silently as a shadow, approached the motionless woman. A hand touched her sleeve with timid reverence.

Eliza Haldayne wheeled, the scowl of her black brows smoothed, her iron features softened a trifle as she looked down into the soft almond eyes shining up at her.

Slim, small-boned, and graceful, even by Western standards this little Chinese maiden was attractive. She was not of this wild Lo-Lo tribe; she was a Manchu, of the reigning race of the Flowery Kingdom, stolen from a south-bound caravan as a baby, fourteen years before. Her race showed in her skin of creamy gold which overlaid the dusky pink of her cheeks, in the blue-black hair, drawn back in two satin "wings" from the smooth forehead, in the small pomegranate mouth and the tapering fingers whose daintiness daily labor could not entirely destroy;

in the high-arched little feet encased in ugly skin shoes. Contrasted with the Lo-Lo women with their dusty, unkempt hair, their flat feet, and their faces withered and drawn even in youth, she was like a pearl in the dust, like a star set in the clay.

Into the grim, barren life of the white woman the affection of this alien girl had stolen like a sweet, insinuating perfume. No hint of the jealous hatred she felt for women of her own race marked the serenity of the strange friendship; there was too little ground for comparison. She had seen the girl grow from a child to maidenhood; to her eyes the little Chinese maid was a bejeweled plaything, a perfect lily-bloom, the one thing of beauty she allowed herself.

The play of affection on her face now made the woman's features almost gentle. "What is is, Tai Loy?" she asked in Cantonese.

A ripple of anxiety passed over the girl's face, like the slight passage of wind over water.

"The Teacher is troubled," she replied in the same medium. "I watched from the hut and I saw her bend her brows, so,"— her own pretty arches drew together. "Tai Loy wishes she could help. Is it that the Yellow Wolf is troubling again?"

The white woman's gaze again sought the far horizon of the desert.

"No, it 's not the Yellow Wolf this time," she finally admitted. "I have to go away from here, Tai Loy."

"Away from Han T'sin!" There was stunned unbelief in the girl's voice. "For always, my Teacher?"

"Yes, always," came the grim reply. "It costs too much to keep me here, Tai Loy. You know I 've told you of the mission funds before."

Little Tai Loy seemed unable to grasp it. Her words came in a shocked whisper: "There is no other way? There is no one else who could give money?"

"Yes, there 's some money I should have, but I can't get it because of a vain, lazy fool of a woman!" The words were ripped out, hot with passion. Tai Loy fixed her gentle eyes on her companion's face in surprised dread. She had never before heard her mentor speak so harshly.

"A spoiled, worthless woman!" Eliza Haldayne's face was black with anger. Her thoughts leaped down the years, seeing only the clearer for the time that had elapsed. Han T'sin faded away, little Tai Loy vanished into the limbo of things not born as yet. She was back in her American home,— a strange, tense child constantly being thrust aside for the whims of an indulged younger sister. She watched herself grow to austere girlhood, unliked and un-

wanted, a bitter green bud beside a too-flamboyant flower, her plainness accentuated by the other's beauty. She watched herself bloom into lonely womanhood,—too caustic, too severe, still dominated by the beautiful tyrant of the family. Parental affection was denied her, showered upon the spoiled beauty; friendship passed her by to be offered as incense to the selfish sister.

One warming ray of affection alone stole down the years to soften her face with its memory. On gentle little Florence, the lonely girl had showered all the fierce love of her strange nature. In time, however, even this solace was denied her. The delicate little girl was sent away to boarding-school; the elder sister remained in her distasteful environment, grimmer and more forsaken than ever.

She saw dawn in white-hot flame the one love of her life, a love for which she would have bowed her stubborn body to the ground; and she knew the hot resentment, the bitter pain of having that love, like everything else of her life, given the women she had come to hate.

As on the never-forgotten day when she had learned this, body and soul writhed in an agony of jealousy. Even now, long years after, her breast swelled with her convulsed breath, her nostrils twitched. Oh, it had been a glorious revenge she had taken! If she had not won his

love, the hated Drusilla had not kept it. The match had been broken,— that had been the supreme effort of her life. She had known the satisfaction and pain of seeing him married to another.

There was a grim smile in the black eyes at the memory of Drusilla's hysterical rage. Each shrieked reproach her sister had hurled upon her had been balm to the terrible ache in her heart.

Then the scene shifted quickly. Her banked-up emotions had found an outlet in religion. She had flung herself into missionary work with a zeal which was almost fanaticism, outstripping gentler workers with her intense concentration. It had carried her far, that abnormal ability for work,— away from the land where she had put in the lonely years of her youth; away from the aging, irascible father, from the sister, not so beautiful now, settling down to a whining, aimless existence and feverishly spending what was left of the family fortune in a vain attempt to fill her empty life. Han T'sin came over the horizon — the dying poplar trees — the gray Gobi — and Tai Loy.

She wheeled, to find the little maid's eyes fastened upon her stony profile with fascinated dread. Again her features softened. She patted the tapering hand which still rested on her sleeve. Emboldened, Tai Loy pressed closer and

the dusky pink deepened beneath the gold of her cheeks.

"What will become of me, when you go? My Teacher, I am afraid of Han T'sin. The Yellow Wolf has deigned to do me the honor of noticing my miserable face."

Poor little Tai Loy looked not so much honored as frightened as she spoke, and Miss Haldayne's black brows met at her words.

The attentions of Yellow Wolf — the brutal chief of a bandit crew, a bloodthirsty savage, worthy descendant of the Hun-yu — could bode no good for delicate little Tai Loy. Yellow Wolf and his band were the bane of the squalid little village which they made their headquarters. On their inbred superstition, on their blind idolatry, on the hideous cruelty and lust they practised, Christianity had made never a mark. Yellow Wolf was her personal enemy,— Eliza Haldayne realized that. Her spirit raged within her at the knowledge that her departure would leave the little village of lukewarm Christians at the mercy of this barbarian. But Tai Loy he should not have! She settled this with characteristic decision.

"You shall come with me, Tai Loy,— you and Yeun Low, the blind beggar. You two are the only sincere souls in this whole village of hypocrites!" She added it more to herself than to

the girl. "The bearer will be here any day now with the money and the camels. You shall come to my country with me, Tai Loy."

She was not looking at the girl and so failed to see the curious shadow which darkened the gentle little face; nor did she note the plaintive lilt of the voice which thanked her.

The little maid stood motionless for a moment, her eyes on the preoccupied face of the foreign woman who had shown her such unwonted affection; then silently she turned and slipped between the dry and rattling tamarisks which fringed the village.

The earth was giving up its heat in dry gasps, but the tyrannical heat of the sun overhead was lessening as it slipped down the sky in a haze of its own making. The scarred clay ridges cast long shadows in the smoky red light; the far distances seemed to throw off their lethargy and stretch themselves. The bitter iron land was reaching out for the invigorating cold of night.

To Tai Loy, stealing through the brush, came the sound of preparations for the evening meal. The grinding of nut-meats, the treble singsong of children, the voices of women crying nasally to one another. But it came faintly; here in the tamarisks was silence brooding. Here the shallow seepage from the spring spread out in a pool large enough to reflect a triangle of sky. Tai

Loy suddenly paused in the brush, tense with caution.

Crouched above the mirroring water was a man's figure, wrapped in a blue-gray robe many sizes too large for his shrunken frame, and exceedingly dirty and ragged. Apparently he was studying his own reflection in the pool, with deepest interest, but as a dry twig snapped under the girl's foot the withered face was raised sharply and held tense, listening. Then one might have seen that he had no eyes, only scarred sockets where eyes had once been.

The girl spoke, to ease the apprehension in that old face.

"It is only Tai Loy, Father." She went forward and crouched beside his still figure on the margin.

The old man gazed up in the direction of her voice with the pitiful over-attention of the blind.

Tai Loy continued. "The Teacher is to leave Han T'sin when the bearer comes with the camels. She has been called back to the Western land and when she leaves I will go; and with her you will go, too, Yeun Low."

There was a short silence; then the old man shook his head from side to side, slowly and sadly.

"I have felt too many suns rise on the Gobi to

leave it now. I knew the youth of Han T'sin; that was before ever your father's father was born, little Loy. I will not die away from the land of my fathers."

The girl did not dispute this. She leaned forward and her tapering fingers brushed the ragged blue-gray of his robe.

"What do you see for me, O Ancient One?" she half whispered. She crouched on her heels there beside him and the tender green of her trailing robe melted into the carpet of young reed-shoots that edged the marge. "Tell me what will be!"

There was a long silence; then, above the rustling of the dry tamarisks, the reedy old voice rose cryptically:

"The ripe pomegranate hangs low on the branch and the reach of the Yellow One is swift!"

Beneath the smooth gold of the girl's cheeks the mellow rose receded slowly. Tai Loy spoke more low:

"Is that all you can see, my father?"

The sightless eyes stared down into the shallow pool fringed with its scanty growth. The girl waited patiently, one slender hand stealing to her breast.

The voice quavered once more from the shriveled throat:

"Dust, gray dust, hangs low over the plain and the dawn is not for you."

A shadow crept into the soft almond eyes and Tai Loy's voice was troubled.

"I am stupid beyond my years, O Wise One," she said gently, "and what is light to you is my darkness. Tell me clearly of the future, Father."

Again the wind rattled the tamarisks. The smoky red light had deepened perceptibly before the blind beggar's voice sounded monotonously:

"Gray dust over the plain, Tai Loy, and the dawn is not for you!"

A sudden chill swept the little maid crouched there on her heels. The still water before her flushed red with the angry sky. The tamarisks rustled warningly across the pool, twigs snapped beneath a foot. One of the village women was coming to fill her water-bowl at the spring. Like a startled hare Tai Loy sprang to her feet and fled amid the thickening shadows.

On the edge of the straggling settlement, beneath a towering poplar which never leafed, stood the one stone structure of the village. Imposing, this place, compared with the squalid clay huts clustered at its foot. Perched on a rise of ground, built of unhewn stones, whose crannies afforded dreary foothold for a species of dry gray lichen, it had a dignity through contrast and association which caused even the professed

Christians of Han T'sin to regard it with superstitious awe. For this was the Temple of the Dragon Shrine, the abode of that dreaded Red One, the Ruby God of Han T'sin, Lord of the Shadows and of Death, the idol before whom even Yellow Wolf the Intrepid bent the knee and whose favor had so long kept his robber band from the slow death they dealt others.

Away from the shadows of the tamarisks the night seemed not so imminent. The sun was a smoky red jewel, seemingly resting on the horizon; the shadow of Tai Loy went bobbing before her, ever growing longer. A crow cawed in surprised derision as she slipped between two loose stones in the temple wall. What was little Christian Tai Loy doing here in the Temple of the Dragon Shrine?

Just the other side of the aperture through which she had squeezed, the girl paused and cast one frightened look over her shoulder. Apparently she had not been observed from the village, but her eyes were caught and held by something invisible from the lower ground, a dark cloud against the red horizon, a pillar of dust moving steadily against the sunset, though the winds had died with dramatic suddenness when evening fell.

Tai Loy's lips moved and although no sound came she was repeating the blind beggar's words:

"Dust — gray dust hangs low over the plain —" She shivered.

A gong sounded within the temple to mark the passing of the sun and a slim, slate-gray figure slipped into the fading light of the outer court. His gaze leaped to the broken stone in the temple wall and he came, straight as a homing dove, toward the girl who lingered in the shadows.

A young priest he was, the shaven head and severe slate-gray robe imparting a dignity incompatible with his years. His eyes were burning with a soft glow never called forth by the Ruby God he served; his voice was low and vibrant as he called her name.

Now the rose pink flamed over Tai Loy's face, pale since the cryptic prophecy of the blind beggar. The green robe over her little breast was like an aspen trembling in the wind. Even to the black satin of her hair the pink tide mounted as he clasped and made prisoner the fluttering hands.

"Tai Loy, for two days you have not come! — two days, my little pomegranate maid, and they were as bitter herbs in my mouth. This morning I begged boon from the Red One, and behold — you came!"

Now again the shadow came into Tai Loy's eyes. "It was not the Red One, Hoang," and she twisted her hands away firmly. "Though he sits

in the Dragon Shrine, he is nothing; he is less than nothing — he is dust, a palmful of ashes. I am very stupid in many things, but this I know: there is a God who is not seen and He is the true God. Oh, my dearly beloved, if you would only believe this and forsake the Dragon Shrine! Truly, the Red One fills me with fearful dislike!"

"Hush, little pomegranate!" The young priest cast a fearful glance over his shoulder toward the blurring outline of the temple. "The Red One is swift to revenge and to strike! Even I cannot avert his vengeance; it is more swift and sure than the Yellow Wolf's. Forsake the Dragon Shrine — Tai Loy, even for you I dare not! The Ruby God is a strong god; he is very ancient, Tai Loy, perhaps of the time of the great Yu. Long before the day dawned for Han T'sin he was, brought from out the land to the west, from out of Burma. Ever so long ago that was, even beyond the memory of the old blind beggar. He is a god, for I see men stand before him and look into his deep eyes and their spirit flags and is dragged from their body and goes elsewhere. I know, for I too have felt that —"

Tai Loy shook the head held close against his breast.

"I too felt that once, but never since the Teacher came. Now I think of the White Christ when I stand before the Dragon Shrine and the

Ruby One's eyes are as mere bits of red glass." Her tone suddenly grew impatient: "Ah, my beloved, why do we waste our little time, our stolen time! My spirit is faint within me to-night, my heart is tearing asunder. The Teacher is to leave Han T'sin and I am to go with her when the camels arrive."

The low cry of surprised pain which broke from the young priest brought an answering moan from the little maid and for a silent moment they clung to each other in the deepening dusk.

It was the man who spoke: "You will go and leave Han T'sin forever — and me!"

Tai Loy struggled with her tears for a moment in silence; then her head was bravely lifted and her eyes sought his, glowing down upon her in the half-light.

"I am afraid of the Yellow Wolf; yet I would stay if you told me to."

The young priest's forehead creased in puzzled pain and he repeated after her almost stupidly: "You are afraid of the Yellow Wolf. Of the Yellow Wolf?" Into the black eyes alarm suddenly smoldered to flame. The small maid was crushed so close in his arms that a little cry broke from her lips.

The man spoke slowly, as one who wishes to convince himself: "The Yellow Wolf has been

gone since the feast of All Souls in the Seventh Month. This is the Feast of the Tombs. Perhaps disaster has overtaken him, perhaps the Red God has withdrawn his protection. It may be that the warring tribes to the north have dealt the slow death he has forced upon so many of their people."

The shadow in Tai Loy's eyes did not lighten. Her voice trembled. "Moons have risen and waned on the absence of the Yellow Wolf before, and yet he always sweeps down upon Han T'sin as the pestilence sweeps. He is very cruel, the Yellow Wolf. He knows where the eyes of the Ancient One have gone. It was he who took little Yat Low four seasons ago, and Yat Low never returned to the village. Hoang, I am afraid! Let us go when the Teacher goes. This is my wish, Beloved, my earnest wish,— that mounted on the same camel we shall flee together far from Han T'sin."

The torture of the young priest's soul showed in his eyes. All of his life had been spent in homage to his god. The fibers of his spirit were straining.

"Tai Loy!" and his voice was sharp with pain. "I cannot tell you now. I will sacrifice to the Red One and ask his favor. There is no need for me here, there are three priests now — Chanchau, that old one; Kublai, my honored elder

brother, and I. Surely, surely, I who have tended the Dragon Shrine so faithfully shall be released to my beloved! Yet —" his voice sank suddenly to the plane of lost hope —"such a thing has never been."

He groaned in anguish and crushed the slim figure against him. "Tai Loy, I do not know, but — Tai Loy, I love you, I love you, my little pomegranate maid!"

A gong vibrated within the temple, its tones eddying outward like circles from a stone flung into a pond. The two clinging figures reluctantly separated. The young priest spoke low and hurriedly: "*Tien huni!* — the time for the evening sacrifice. The Red One guard you, Tai Loy!"

"The Blessings of the White Christ be with you, my beloved," whispered the little maid.

Silently as a shadow she glided between the broken stones in the temple wall. The sky was murky red now. The outline of the poplars and the tamarisks was blurred. The desert sloped away on all sides, vague and vast, like a great saucer, to the horizon. Over the ridges of the clay, split into dry, perpendicular clefts, Tai Loy made her way carefully, her eyes on the uneven ground to guide her slender feet.

Only when a dark bulk, the bulk that a great rock might attain, loomed across the way, did she

glance up. The breath left her chest in a little startled gasp, the almond eyes dilated with fright, the rose seeped away from the smooth gold skin.

Yeun Low had foreseen. The gray dust-cloud had reached Han T'sin. The Yellow Wolf towered before her.

CHAPTER XVI

THE YELLOW WOLF

IN the yellow flicker of candlelight the crouching shadow of the blind beggar leaped up the clay walls like a humpbacked giant. Eliza Haldayne paused in the act of tying together her few belongings. The candlelight gleamed in her watchful black eyes as a burst of shouting came from the village. It sank again to a hectic chant and she gave the baggage her attention once more.

The blind beggar resumed his interrupted drone:

"The pack of the Yellow Wolf is in full cry to-night. Han T'sin rocks beneath the thunder of his followers' tread. Like a shadow I moved about the village and this I have heard the women tell: three villages in the Khingan hills lie smoking at their backs; there are new-made widows in the Sayan this moon. They spoke of silver taken recently from a bearer from the east. White Teacher, when did the carrier leave Nanking with the money sent you?"

Eliza Haldayne straightened as though a sword had suddenly menaced her. Her black eyes leaped to sudden comprehension. "You mean — he has held up my carrier? — the man sent with the money and the camels?"

The old man listened, his head painfully on one side. He moved his hand with the patient gesture of the blind. "There are three new camels in the train of the Yellow Wolf. I have heard the tinkle of new-got silver," he insinuated.

The white woman's eyes flashed with wrath. "The beastly robber! The *highbinder!*" She made a swift movement as though to swoop through the door. The old man flung his body forward in the direction of the faint sound and his fingers hooked in her skirt.

"Wait! Wait!" The old voice was shrill with alarm. "Reflect! The pack of the Yellow Wolf is full and — his bandits have no love for foreign devils!"

Her impetuous rush had half dragged him to his knees, but the wisdom of his words halted her. It was true. What could she and her few lukewarm Christians accomplish against the evil power of the Yellow Wolf's band? She stood for a long moment, her black brows knit, her lips pursed reflectively over her large square teeth. At her feet the old beggar crouched, the uncer-

tain snadows playing over his face and blotting his eyeless sockets as the candle blew in the draft.

That shrill warning had carried another fear to the white woman's mind. "Tai Loy!" she cried with sudden anxiety. "Where is the child? This is no night for her to be abroad in Han T'sin, with the Yellow Wolf at large."

"Before the sunset gong I spoke with her in the tamarisks by the pool of Odontala," the old voice quavered. "Shall I seek her?"

"Yes. I 'll stay here, out of the Yellow Wolf's way. It 's bound to come to a quarrel between us if we meet," she said grimly, more to herself than to him. Her mouth grew grim at the passive part she was forced to play, then she buckled herself to the task in hand.

"No, not that way," as the old man was feeling his way to the entrance. "You 'll have the whole pack on you if you 're seen coming out of here. This way." She tugged a large chest from the wall at the back of the room and showed a hole made by prying out some of the sun-baked clay bricks. It let down to a slight depression in the ground, its telltale entrance hidden by close-growing tamarisk shrubs. "Come back the same way. No need of running into trouble, or of taking all Han T'sin into our confidence. Nobody knows about this entrance now but you.

Get Tai Loy and bring her here. I 'll hide her until the band moves on."

She helped the blind man through the opening and heard him moving through the familiar dark with more certainty than one who depended on the light. Then, turning back to the chest, she lifted the lid and grimly laid a revolver and some cartridges on the rude table. "Might come to that," she said, speaking aloud in the way of one much alone.

From the entrance of the hut she could look upon the village a short distance away. Fires leaped beneath the poplars, dark figures moved before them, temporarily blotting the red glare from sight. Faint faces stood out in momentary relief as a log burst asunder with a shower of sparks. The nasal chant rose and fell on the cold air brooding over the desert. From far away the barbaric song was answered by an outburst of chuckling laughter,— hideous clanking laughter: the hyenas were answering their human brethren.

A faint rustling in the tamarisks at one side of the hut caused the woman's hand to drop to the revolver. A dark figure separated itself from the black background and glided into the radius of the candlelight. It was Tai Loy. Between the blue-black wings of her hair her face was colorless.

"Yeun Low found you, then," burst from the white woman in relief. She slammed the door behind the girl. Tai Loy tried to control the quivering of her lips, that she might speak.

"I did not see the Old One. I fled here from the Yellow Wolf. On the little hill below the temple he rose before me. Honeyed words dripped from his lips and he tried to sheath the daggers of his eyes, but I feared him and I ran. I heard him laugh. As the hyenas laugh so did he— and I ran, my Teacher. He stumbled after, but I am fleeter of foot and in the tamarisk patch he lost me. What shall I do, O my Teacher? I am afraid. There was little Yat Low. He looked upon her, even as he looks upon me, and she never returned to the village. I am afraid, my Teacher."

The forehead of the woman was creased with sudden lines. She stood silent in desperate thought, smoothing the satin hair of the frightened little creature before her. This was a terrible problem given to Eliza Haldayne for solution. If the Yellow Wolf had made up his mind to have Tai Loy, he would search Han T'sin from end to end. Not a rice-pack, not a crevice nor a cranny would be overlooked. Nor would the fear of the Foreign Devil's country, which up to now had protected her, be sufficient to save this hut from the search.

A scratching sounded behind the chest and both women ran to help the old blind beggar through the opening.

The breath was nearly gone from the shriveled lungs; his frail old body shook with the beating of his heart. Between gasps his voice faltered:

"The Yellow Wolf comes to search this hut. He has sworn by the Ruby God to have Tai Loy. Quickly, come quickly! There is but one safe place,— in the back of the Dragon Shrine, behind the very god itself. Never will he think to look for her there."

"Yes, yes!" Poor little Tai Loy was nearly incoherent with fright. "The Old One is right! Hoang can hide me; even though the other two priests are there, he can hide me." She was gathering her green robe from about her feet and frantically crawling backward through the opening.

Miss Haldayne peered into the darkness after her. "Circle the village," she advised rapidly. "Look out for sentries posted outside. I 'll let them think you 're here; that 'll give you time to reach the temple."

The frightened little face vanished; the dry tamarisks crackled for a moment, then were silent, Tai Loy and the old blind man were swallowed up in the darkness. The white woman shoved the heavy chest back into place, then

hastily crossed the room to the door as a fresh burst of shouting, nearer now, split the cold air.

Yellow Wolf flung open the door, to find himself staring into a revolver pointed by the grim-mouthed woman he hated. For the moment the yellow glare of the candle, after the black night outside, caused him to halt and blink. The uncertain shadows playing over his face with the rush of air rendered him more fiercely repulsive than ever. He was a giant compared with the stunted Lo-Lo he ruled; his face, burned nearly black, was deeply lined from squinting into the sun-glare of the Gobi. His hair was a black thatch, bristling in a mat from his scalp, and falling halfway down his naked back. Hung with skins and patches of filthy rags, his belt thrust with a murderous-edged hatchet and a stolen gun — this was the Scourge of the Gobi; the Yellow Pestilence of the Desert.

His small fierce eyes leaped about the room, striving to pierce beyond the golden mesh of the candle's flare. The corners were thick with shadows and the menacing revolver kept him from advancing farther.

He spoke fiercely to the unafraid white woman: "Where is she? Where have you hidden Tai Loy?"

Black hatred gleamed scornfully from the eyes that confronted him.

"Why should I hide Tai Loy?" she jeered. "Is the Yellow Wolf so hated that women hide from him?"

The taunt told. The lips twisted away from the man's teeth. Only the revolver barrel pointed unwaveringly kept the Wolf at bay. A stir ran through those of his followers who had followed him there and were clustered at his back, half seen through the darkness.

The bandit spat out an oath and fingered the edge of his hatchet meaningly. "The White Devil will do well to bring out the maid," he warned. "She was seen to run in here."

Miss Haldayne met this with a maddening laugh. Her black eyes were fanatical. "You 're very brave, Yellow Wolf,— are n't you? — to make war on women. Do you think I would give Tai Loy up to you? She is not for such desert spawn as you!" She eyed him insolently, moving squarely before the door as his eyes plunged too far into the room with its shifting shadows. Tai Loy should be well clear of the tamarisk patch by now.

The face of the savage contracted with sudden rage. The enmity which had ever smoldered between him and the white woman was fanned to new life.

"Bring out the maid!" he threatened with another oath, "or by the Red God of my fathers

you shall go to join the devils from whom you are sprung!"

The woman before him sneered. The fierce light of battle had leaped to her black eyes; they glowed in the golden half-light.

"Yellow Wolf of Han T'sin, murderer of men, despoiler of women, hear me now!" The words were melodramatic, but her delivery was slow and scornful. It dropped from her lips into the sudden silence with the inevitability of dripping water.

"Scourge of the Desert, curse of the Hills of T'ang, bastard offspring of the hyenas, before I would deliver Tai Loy into your profane hands I would kill her with my own! The mark of the Beast is set on your forehead; the wrath of God is red above you! Upon you shall fall the judgment meted out to Cain. You shall be as one with Abaddon and Babylon in the day to come. Leave me in peace. Whoever first sets foot over this threshold, you or one of your rascally crew, I will send him to his fathers with a bullet through his filthy hide!"

Like all other savages, the Lo-Los delighted in the dramatic. Superstition mingled with their very blood and ran in every vein. The curse hovered in the air as an almost tangible cloud before their dreading eyes; instinctively they shrank from the vehemence of the white woman.

Even the Yellow Wolf halted at its cold, measured cadences, rendered the more dreadful by the unfamiliar phrases. A slight movement traversed the half-circle of barbarians, more felt than seen, as an unseen breeze stirs through a rice-field at night. The Yellow Wolf fell back a step, then his head turned sharply.

An outburst of shouts rose on the night. Unintelligible cries rent the air out there in the village. The chief wheeled, his lips twisting in hate from his blackened teeth. He told off two men, half-naked savages, and hurled his orders at them:

"Guard the entrance of this hut. Let the White Devil try to escape if she dare! I am the Yellow Wolf of the Gobi. Who shall attempt to balk my desires!" With this braggadocio he disappeared in the darkness, his feet pounding the clay as he raced to the scene of the outbreak.

Eliza Haldayne bolted fast the heavy door, then brushed the beads of sweat from her forehead with the back of her free hand. Tai Loy must have nearly reached the temple by now. There, if she could evade the other two priests, Hoang could hide her until the restless pack of the Wolf had left.

The long night moved on, punctuated by frightful outbursts of shrill shouts. Han T'sin cow-

ered beneath the heel of the swaggering bandits; its natives crouched in their squalid huts or hastened to do the bidding of their tyrant. All that night Eliza Haldayne sat on the chest, her back to the wall, her revolver pointing at the closed square of doorway opposite. Twice only did she stir, to light a fresh candle when the old one burned down to the saucer. Without the hut she could hear the two guards grumbling at their inactivity; yet such was their fear of the Yellow Wolf that their vigilance never relaxed.

When the little slit of window high up on the wall showed a pallid square of dawn, fresh voices drifted to her ears. The Yellow Wolf's suddenly sounded close at hand in ferocious good humor, but he made no further demand for the girl.

The hours passed, to the weary woman in the narrow hut seeming to drag with leaden feet. The sun began to beat down with its accustomed fury. Only the little window-slit brought any air to the dim interior.

There was a sudden hubbub outside, the rising of shrill voices, a stir of excitement. She heard the scraping of wood, of something heavy being dragged over the hard ground. Her fingers gripped the handle of the revolver tensely. Once she lifted it and placed the cold rim against her temple, tentatively. It fell again to her lap, its muzzle pointed to the door, as a sudden mocking

voice, the voice of the Yellow Wolf, broke the heated silence which had fallen.

"White Devil, behold your disciple, the Christian of Han T'sin! Thus will we deal with all foreign devils, with all who cross the path of the Yellow Wolf!"

There was something menacing in that mockery which dragged Eliza Haldayne to her feet with weary dread, across the room to the narrow slit of window. As her face appeared, a white patch against the shadowy interior, a taunting shout rose from the barbarians ranged outside, but she hardly heard it.

In the blinding glare of the sun, driving down now with cruel force before the hut, rose a wooden framework a little over six feet in height. It tapered up as a pyramid, its apex only large enough to clip a man about the neck. It was the prison of the old Chinese beggar Yeun Low. In it he was forced to stand painfully on tiptoe to keep from being slowly strangled. His foothold was of bricks precariously piled one on another, his sightless face was strained painfully upright in his effort, to the full blaze of the sun. Flies and gnats hung over him in buzzing clouds. It was a typical Chinese torture.

Again came the savage mockery of the bandit chief:

"Behold the half-chewed meat of the Yellow

Wolf! This time I shall finish my meal. To-night a brick shall be removed from beneath his feet, if that is necessary. There will be no need for another one to-morrow!"

Sickened, Eliza Haldayne staggered away from the slit of window, back to the close interior of the hut. The hard crust of austerity was broken for once. She was a palpitating, horror-stricken woman, the revolver lying forgotten in her lap, her black eyes glazed and staring, only the muscles of her throat moving convulsively now and then throughout the hot, torturing hours.

Red sky above the tamarisks, a smoky red light hovering over the desert. Shadows grew long, thickened and met. The Yellow Wolf held strangely aloof. Night descended on the dusty face of the Gobi. Then the exhausted woman stirred herself wearily to some show of alacrity. Carefully glancing over her shoulder at the narrow slit of window barely perceptible in the darkness, she tugged aside the heavy square chest and lowered herself into the outer blackness.

After the suffocating heat of the one room the night air was gratefully cold and fresh. She stood for one reeling moment in the shrubs, bracing herself by long breaths. Then, cautiously, that those guarding the hut might not hear the crackling twigs, she crept through the brush, out to the open desert beyond the oasis.

Up and down, scrambling, falling on the uneven clay ridges, now forced to pass around one too steep to scale, now crawling painfully down a steep declivity, she made her way, until the black mass of the temple bulked large before her.

Through the gap in the outer wall, the gap that little Tai Loy knew so well, she crawled. A dark figure emerged from the black background and leaped toward her, while she swayed back in weak terror.

"Tai Loy!" The cry was low but agonized.

"Hoang! Thank God!" Eliza Haldayne stumbled and would have fallen but for the steadying grip of the young priest.

"Tai Loy — where is she!" came in a hoarse whisper.

That cleared the white woman's clouding brain. A cold hand seemed to grip her heart. "She is n't here with you? I sent her, last night! The Yellow Wolf thought she was in my hut. I let him think so, that she might have time to escape. I thought she was here."

The young priest wrung his hands together in anguish, but no words came.

Voices suddenly raised themselves, perilously close,— the two priests walking through the temple. Hoang forced himself to alertness. "The others!" he whispered brokenly. "Come;

there is only one place where you will be safe. No one will suspect. Come."

Silently as a shadow he glided through the gloom before her; through an entrance of crumbling masonry, holding aside curtains that she could not see in the dark, guiding her along a tortuous passage. A mesh of golden light gleamed through a curtain drawn before some lit space. Hoang stopped.

"Silence!" he cautioned. "Do not move on your life while there is a footstep out there. I go to find out what I can."

He glided away and Eliza Haldayne, in an agony of apprehension, was left hiding at the back of the heathen shrine, behind the Ruby God of Han T'sin.

Tai Loy was not here! The menace of that fact kept pounding upon her tired brain, until in sheer self-defense she forced herself to take note of outward things to quell the panic it brought. Things took gradual shape through the weave of the curtain. She saw the flare of candles in their red candlesticks. One of the dragon supports of the shrine gleamed in richest gold inlay and lacquer, red and black,— a treasure looted from some rich city in the south. Directly before her, so near that her outstretched arm could touch its back, was the idol. Fire opal and sea-green jade, wine topaz and golden beryl,

black jasper, apple-green chrysoprase, and rubies from Kyat Pyen blazed steadily in the candles' glow. An incongruous object in that squalid Lo-Lo village, a marvel of intricate carving still telling in its exquisite workmanship of the Burma temple from which it had been stolen centuries before.

The curtains swayed behind her and her strained nerves jumped. It was Hoang, his face shell-white, his eyes black, lusterless blots of fearful apprehension.

"I have a camel waiting on the desert to the north. You must flee at once."

"Tai Loy!" gasped the woman.

The young priest winced. "I shall search for her until I find her; then she too shall ride to safety."

Silent as the darkness through which they felt their way, they stole along the passage. Beneath the woman's hand the cold rough stones ceased. The air grew suddenly fresh. They had reached the outer court. Through the gap in the crumbling wall Hoang glided before her and still silently they made their way down the slight, rough hill.

There was danger now of being seen, for a leper-white moon rode the heavens. They lowered themselves cautiously in the deep shadows cast by the scars of clay. Below them, Han T'sin

cowered beneath the dying poplars. The moonlight picked out the white patch of water where the blind beggar had talked to Tai Loy the night before. Two fires leaped beneath the trees; the ragged bandit crew gathered about them, their figures dark against the rosy flame. Fitfully the wind blew snatches of their savage chants to the ear. The moon sailed higher, burst into white flame in the sky. Its radiance picked out the jagged edges of the ridges and benches of clay; it picked out the black pitfalls in their path, showing their depths as velvet black. It picked out something else, lying there in a shallow clay depression, something leaf-green.

A sudden recklessness of danger straightened the woman and the young priest and sent them flying over the rugged ground.

Beneath the white leprosy of the moon, the tender green on the robe seemed a spring leaf fluttered to the earth, a crumpled leaf. The little face between the outspread blue-black hair was upturned to the sky, a bit of exquisitely carved ivory, and as cold and still.

The Old One had been right. The dawn was not for Tai Loy.

CHAPTER XVII

HOANG

FOR a long moment the eyes of the two clung together in mute anguish over that little green figure. The young priest's face was blank as white paper. Crouched on his heels, his slate-gray robe melting into the gray light, his shaven head gleaming ivory-white in the unpitying light of the moon, he was no less motionless than the dead Tai Loy.

Then he slowly swayed forward until his forehead rested for a brief moment on the little still bosom. When he lifted his face again to the moonlight it was overspread with a sort of hopeless serenity. His voice came hushed to the ears of the listening white woman:

"For many years, long and faithfully, have I served the Dragon Shrine, have I served the Ruby God of Han T'sin,— that worthless thing of wood and metal! To it I sacrificed the flower of my youth, the fragrance of my love. Yet it could not save my little pomegranate maid from the claws of the Beast. It is worthless wood, senseless stone — as you said — as you said, Tai

Loy!" His voice dropped to a lower note, as in a song, as though that still green form could hear and be comforted. "Little pomegranate maid, the God you revered shall be my God! The Teacher you love I shall serve for the rest of my days. Thus do I answer your prayers, little Loy — your prayers, little Loy — too late!"

His voice broke and his bowed head was hidden for the moment in his hands.

The white woman had slowly straightened and towered above the kneeling man and the prostrate figure. Her black brows met in one unbroken line, her mouth was grim, her eyes gleamed. She seemed to gain stature in the moonlight. As an avenging Miriam, she looked toward dark Han T'sin and the leaping fires beneath the poplars. Her nostrils twitched with the fire of her passion.

"Han T'sin! Cradle of the yellow beast, breeder of desert spawn, may Almighty God smite you in His righteous wrath! For every drop of this innocent blood may a strong man wither and die! May the pool of Odontala become a dry crust! May your name be an abomination throughout the desert! May your Red Idol —"

She checked herself abruptly, struck by a sudden thought, her black eyes flaming. On the motionless figure of the crouching man she wheeled.

"Han T'sin has robbed us of this — our dearest love. It has robbed me of my little worldly goods; it would as lightly rob us of our lives. We will rob it of the only thing of value it possesses! Hoang, we will take the Red Idol with us on the camels!"

A deep red light burned in the black eyes. Her words rang crisply with grim triumph. "A worthy revenge! Han T'sin will remember this crime as it watches the dust settle on the empty Dragon Shrine. The idol's jewels shall be sold in America and the money shall spread the teachings of Christ throughout this benighted desert! Little Tai Loy shall not have been murdered in vain!"

The young priest gently drew a sleeve of the green robe over the still face. Then he straightened solemnly. Only the deep pain glowing in the stoical eyes told of the anguish he suffered.

"We will take the Red Idol," he said simply.

With heavy hearts, they ascended the slight hill. The other two priests had gone to the village below. The place was empty. They felt their way along the dark passage which led to the back of the Dragon Shrine.

The yellow candles in their red holders glowed as serenely as though no still little figure lay cold in the moonlight. In their gold haze the Ruby God of Han T'sin weltered in his own

dazzle and his deep-red eyes glowed. An acid triumph surmounted the cold ache in Eliza Haldayne's heart at the grim justice she was meeding. With the strength of a man she helped the young priest lift the heavy idol from the Dragon Shrine where it had stood for years. A curtain, looted tapestry from the East, was stretched on the floor and received the fallen god. In the flicker of the candles the red eyes appeared to glow with malicious helplessness, the ebony lips twisted from the ivory teeth in futile rage.

About the four pillars which supported the Dragon Shrine the red-and-black lacquered dragons were watching in bulging-eyed astonishment. In the uncertain light they appeared to crawl to a vantage-point, to twist closer to the poles, to puff noiseless smoke from their amazed nostrils and knit their startled brows.

The ends of the tapestry were gathered, one by the woman, one by the priest, and in this rude hammock the Red One was carried toward the rear passage.

Before they had quite gained it they stopped in sudden alarm. A footfall sounded on the stone step without, a figure appeared in the entrance arch, a figure that stood blinking, dazzled by the change from the night to the blaze of the many candles. The yellow radiance fell on the

skin-clad body, the blackened face, and the bristling thatch of the Yellow Wolf.

It was only a moment that he stood dazed, his unbelieving eyes squinted toward the gaping space of the empty Dragon Shrine, but it was one of those moments which tell in the scales of fate. From the tense young priest came a queer sound, a soft snarl, such a sound as a great cat-creature would make in hate. Through the golden haze darted a lithe avenging figure, more swift even than a great cat would be, and as sure. The light glanced for a brief second on the blade of an upraised dagger, flashed again on its downward plunge; then, with deadly accuracy, it was sheathed in the Yellow Wolf's side.

A bellow of rage rang to the stone corners of the temple; the bandit broke through that costly stupefaction and blundered toward the young priest, fumbling fingers reaching for the hatchet in his belt. The flashing dagger was withdrawn viciously, flashed, and again descended, the point bit into the flesh — bit deep, this time, for his unguarded movement had betrayed the Wolf's left breast and the needle-point of the weapon found the heart.

There was a moment, eons long, in which the echoes of that closed-in shout still rang in their ears, while the stricken giant rocked stupidly

on wide-planted, failing legs and tried to see his assailant through the mist of death that mingled with the yellow haze and formed a fog before his eyes. Through the roar of approaching death in his ears came the ringing voice of the young priest, cold, sharp-pointed as ice.

"This for the murder of Tai Loy, thou yellow beast!"

It pierced through the tumult in his brain. The stricken bandit tried to bellow to his followers, unaware that his voice made less than the least whisper. His arms shot out, fumbling through the fog bearing down upon him, trying to reach the straight, scornful figure his failing eyes could just make out, then the Scourge of the Gobi tottered and crashed to the ground, driving the dagger still deeper into his savage breast, and lay there outsprawled in the golden light, powerless at last, before the empty Dragon Shrine.

It was a simple matter to lead away two camels from the herd tethered at the end of the village. No one had been left to guard them. Han T'sin lay cowering in its huts; the followers of the Yellow Wolf were gathered about the leaping fires under the poplars.

On one of the animals the fallen god was placed, ignominiously twisted in its tapestry curtain. On this one, too, the white woman

mounted, her eyes gleaming with strange red lights in the cold light of the moon. But when they were ready to start, the young priest said simply, "Wait!" and disappeared among the shadows of the scarred hill.

The night grew in long moments before he came to view again, stumbling and climbing over the clay ridges, and in his arms was a still green figure.

"She was not of Han T'sin," and the mournful cadence of his voice was like a requiem. "She shall not be placed in the gray clay where hyenas prowl and snarl over the dead. To the north there is a tiny oasis where, above sweet waters, three willows bend and where I have seen white butterflies flutter. There we will take her."

The camels rose and lurched into their swinging gait at the command. Keeping to the black declivities which marred the face of the desert, they were as shadows fleeing among shadows, as swift and sure as the passing of the night wind.

The white woman looked back once as her camel took the lead. The fires of Han T'sin were red stars set in the desert, ever growing smaller. The temple where the dead Wolf lay outsprawled in the incense-filled golden silence was a black blot against the sky. The dying village crouched beneath the dying trees.

On the swaying back of the second animal the

young priest's figure was rigid. His face was marmoreal in the moon's glare; the little dead Tai Loy was cradled in his arms.

Tai Loy had her wish. Mounted on the same camel, they were fleeing far from Han T'sin.

CHAPTER XVIII

THE CURTAIN ASCENDS

OUT of the darkness dawned a star, a gleam of light faintly, steadily breaking. A gray vapor seemed to uproll curtainwise in oppressive silence. Shape and color were born, seen dimly at first, growing in density on my aching eyes. The red glow before me shrunk and separated and became the twin ruby eyes of the idol.

"We brought it into this country, Hoang and I. No need telling how — Hoang planned it. Hoang's clever."

It was Miss Haldayne's voice, thin and far away, beating upon my ears, and I dimly knew that I had been hearing that thin voice for centuries of time, ever since I had first met the red stare of the Ruby God. And even as I realized this I became aware of a prickling and tingling starting up my limbs; the sluggish blood stirred through chilled veins.

"We hid it for a while, planning to remove the stones and sell them one at a time so that it would n't create too much sensation. We were

going to turn the money over to the missionaries. Then the devil in the thing began to work. Oh, you need n't look at me like that, George Rogers! There 's a very real devil in it. What do you know of Chinese sorcery, you who have never seen the heart of the Gobi! Hoang told me its history. It has another, a Chinese name, which means 'That which Cannot be Hid.' Time after time the warring tribes to the north sought to steal it from the temple of Han T'sin. It has been hidden in the Khingan Hills. A chief from the Sayan made off with it and hid it in his wild country. Always it was somehow returned to the Dragon Shrine. I laughed at that once, like you. Now I know better. It has been a millstone about our necks. We began to hate the thing. We even feared to pry out the gems and sell them. The Lord did n't seem to want the evil wealth it would bring.

"Once, in San Francisco's Chinatown, I felt the eyes of a man upon me one day and turned. It was one of the Yellow Wolf's band — here in America! I saw recognition leap into his face; then the crowd swept between us and I got away. That settled it. I knew that the call of the idol had been heard in Han T'sin and that Hoang and I were to be hunted down. That very day we came down here, to Dune House. Drusilla was with me then — the whining, flabby thing you

see — and my dead sister Florence's two children. This place seemed the safest haven. It was an old house built by my father when he expected this part of the coast to boom.

"How can I tell you of the curse the thing has been! We tried to hide it, Hoang and I, lest its call go out from here. We buried it deep in the sand back there in the dunes. The winds blew until the sand was blown away and the head stuck up above it, the wicked red eyes staring toward the house as if it were watching us. We flung it into the water, but we flung it too close in. Each low tide the ugly head protruded, until I could n't stand it, and we dragged it out one day and put it in this room.

"Here Kublai the priest, the brother of Hoang, followed. Ann saw him hiding up the gully that day. In the night he came stealing into the house, as we knew he would, not guessing that we were prepared. He came with drawn dagger, and to save my life Hoang killed him — killed his brother. Ann was right about the death-howl. Time swung back for Hoang when he saw his dead brother at his feet. He had loved Kublai and he mourned for him in the old fashion of Han T'sin. We buried him in the sand, back there in the dunes, by the light of lanterns.

"After that I knew it was hopeless. That we could only wait. The call of the Red God had

gone out. It had called the yellow vermin here from the heart of the Gobi. Chan-chau, the ancient priest, the last one now, waits outside for his Ruby God and he shall receive — death!"

The black eyes were set in a fierce stare. Though she spoke in English, the woman's voice had fallen to the singsong of the Chinese and unconsciously she had adopted their extravagant speech.

George Rogers's voice was gratefully cool and steady on my ears when he replied. "Just a minute, Aunt Eliza. This thing has more than one angle. We're four against twenty-odd. There are forty fortunes studded in that idol there, but I don't want them!" He spoke as with uncontrollable repulsion. "There's been too much death over this thing now. I'm not going to subject Ann to such danger for a heathen idol."

His arm went boldly about my rigid body and in the warmth of that embrace my strained muscles relaxed so suddenly that he was half supporting me by his strength.

His calm voice swept steadily on: "Not all the red idols in the world will help poor little Tai Loy now and my Ann isn't going to join her. Aunt Eliza, you are going to call to that Chinese priest that he can have his heathen god."

For a long moment I watched the black eyes

and the calm hazel ones in silent grapple. Deep red lights were kindled in the strange woman's gaze; then they suddenly burned out, as live coals turn black and dead. Her whole body appeared to shrink, her mighty frame sagged, her stubborn head was drooped. She made a beaten gesture.

"I did it for the best." Despite the strange lethargy gripping me I raised my head, startled. That plaintive voice was so unlike the usual vigorous Eliza Haldayne.

The man spoke gently and low: "I know you did, Aunt Eliza, but believe me, I am acting for the best now."

There was no word spoken as we turned our backs on the gleaming idol and went to the front of the house.

As we entered the front parlor, Hoang turned and now that my stupid prejudice was laid to rest I could see the deep sadness, which I had wilfully taken for sullenness, lying in those unsmiling black eyes; could read the grief which was ever gnawing at the heart faithful to little dead Tai Loy.

Moving as one in a dream, as she had moved on the stairs last night, Miss Haldayne flung aside the red curtain which muffled the bay-window.

Before the house, stoically waiting in the sunshine, were the two we had left. The chief of

the ragged clan was crouching on his heels in the sand, Chinese fashion, but the very old priest stood with folded arms, head bowed as though in silent prayer, while the ocean wind fluttered the slate-gray robe about his wasted body.

At the sound of the woman's voice he straightened to attention, and even beyond the creek where the ragged crew had retreated and were waiting with Oriental patience a tremor ran like a strong wind blowing.

Miss Haldayne turned back with a sort of grim meekness. "I told them they could have the idol. That they could come and get it in safely," she translated. "Only these two are to enter. I said that we 'd shoot the first man to put his foot across the creek."

George Rogers narrowed his eyes reflectively. "They 'll suspect a trap," he demurred.

The gaunt form of the woman held a curious dignity as she answered this: "I have never lied to them. All Han T'sin knows that I will keep my word."

And indeed, with no further assurance than that shouted command, the figure of the squatting chief had straightened and followed the measured step of the old priest along the sandy path.

A dramatic silence had fallen on the jabbering crew across the shallow stream. Only the surge of the water could be heard as the two silent

figures mounted the steps and, unafraid, entered the house of their enemies.

A dramatic silence had fallen upon us as well. Hoang might have been an ivory statue save for the fire in his intense eyes. The gaunt frame of Miss Haldayne sagged as though only her indomitable will bore her up. The hazel eyes of George Rogers held a warm glow of understanding in their depths. He controlled the scene so absolutely that there was no hesitation in the priest's manner. The old man addressed him as the leader; his words came in perfect English, yet slowly as though he weighed and translated them first in his own mind:

"Now for many years has the pool of Odontala fled into the sands. It has become as a dry crust on the face of the desert. Under the poplars Han T'sin is no more. Her children have become wanderers in the sands. The dust of the Gobi has gathered upon the empty Dragon Shrine; the Ruby One has fled from among us. Because of the crimes of the Yellow Wolf, because of the murder of Tai Loy did the Great One turn His face from us. The Yellow Wolf is dead. Han T'sin rose in its wrath and killed his followers. My people are weary of bloodshed and death. They ask only to raise their little ones in peace. We have been harried by the tribes of the North and the tribes of the South have taken the full

measure of revenge upon us for the crimes of the Yellow Wolf. Give us our god, that we may take him to the people that are left and build us a place of rest in the desert. Before I go to join my fathers let me restore the Ruby One to his children; then may they live in peace and industry while the Gobi endures, that he may no more become angered and turn his face from them. This is the prayer of Han T'sin; the Han T'sin that is no more."

I found a dry sob tearing strangely at my throat. I caught George Rogers's hand. "Oh, give it to them!" I choked. "It means God to them!"

The priest's aged eyes turned on me in slow kindliness, but he did not speak.

George Rogers moved toward the door. "Come," he said gently.

With him went the old priest and the ragged stalking chief. With him went I, tense-nerved and silent. In the deserted parlor the beaten woman stared blankly across at the white plaster wall, her black eyes glassy. Hoang sat with folded arms, his head bowed on his breast.

There was not a word spoken as its strange followers were led to the room of the Ruby God. The old priest's head was inclined once, reverently, then, with a strength one would never

suspect in those shrunken arms he laid hold of the idol's base and, aided by the chief, lifted it from its resting place.

An unreal silence appeared to hold the mongrel herd across the creek as the oddly assorted bearers came to view on the veranda with the object of their quest. There was no demonstration of joy, such as one might expect. The desolation of Han T'sin had been too complete for that. Rather one felt the lifting of a great weight from their bosoms, an almost reverent relief which lay too deep to be expressed outwardly.

Our eyes followed them without words as they bore it to the sloping beach. From the front veranda we watched them load it clumsily upon the ancient junk riding the green water out there; watched them clamber after it, lithe brown monkeys in fluttering, picturesque rags. The sun of mid-morning gilded the mast with its crazy tilt; the faint echo of shouted commands came to our ears, the great oar swung awkwardly around; the rising tide floated the strange craft, its rag of a sail bellied out with the salt wind; the Ruby God was going back to Han T'sin.

On the upper ocean-gazing veranda, where the sun fell warmly upon us, George Rogers and I spoke together with voices curiously hushed.

One thing remained in my mind, gnawing, unsatisfied. "Those threatening notes — that I don't understand. Who wrote them?"

His answer came promptly and without doubt. "Aunt Eliza herself." Then, at my unexpressed disbelief he continued: "She 's a strange woman. A woman of mighty passions mightily repressed. Her self-control is marvelous, but there 's a limit to self-control, Ann. Underneath, that woman is a mass of palpitating nerves. That she 's kept her reason as well as she has is a tribute to the hard-headed stock from which she 's sprung. In the daytime she was completely mistress of the situation, but at night, when the conscious will is submerged, then all the emotions held in leash, all the impressions, the 'second nature' or the 'subconscious'— call it what you like — comes to its own. You need n't look so skeptical. If you 'd seen some of the effects of shell shock such as I saw in French hospitals you 'd know that the line between the conscious and the subconscious is very vague and it makes you doubt what is real. The poor woman's very fears united to torment her, as our fears materialize in dreams and torture us."

"But she wrote them, she actually wrote them! And she roamed the house; you saw that!" My tone was dazed.

"Tell me, my dear little skeptic, don't you

know that people walk in their sleep? What is that but a subconscious urge controlling the physical body while the conscious will is submerged? Sanity developed a thin, brittle edge there, Ann. It 's my stanch belief that another month more of the strain would have broken it off. She 'll be a mental wreck for a time but when she pulls out of this crisis there 's the making of a fine, strong-minded woman in Eliza Haldayne."

There was a long silence during which his hand strayed to my hair, wind-rumpled, and stroked it gently. With a lazy content I felt his caress. Ours was a strange betrothal, almost without words.

My voice sounded again, dreamy to my own ears:

"You told me that I heard her telling the story of little Tai Loy, that my nerves betrayed me into imagining that I visualized the scene. Why is that more strange than Miss Haldayne writing notes to herself? Why is it, then, that I saw it happening before my own eyes? that I did not *hear* — that I *saw* it all when I looked into the idol's eyes?"

"You were all wrought up, Ann. You virtually hypnotized yourself. You saw only the things that Aunt Eliza herself saw. You got it through the medium of her."

I turned and looked steadily into the hazel eyes.

"How about the prophecy of the blind beggar to Tai Loy at the pool among the tamarisks? This Miss Haldayne did not know — yet — *I know!*"

In the depths of the hazel eyes I saw that I had scored. For a long moment our gazes plunged into each other's. We seemed to touch deeps unknown, deeps hardly to be dreamed of. The roar of the sea came from very far away. Then a gust of salt wind blew fresh and clean into our faces as though to blow away the musty remnants of world-old mysteries; of long-hidden and forbidden things.

My hand was covered by a firm, warm clasp; George Rogers's voice sounded with a pleasantly firm note in it.

"Sweetheart, let 's not seek to know the depths. Let 's stay up here with the wind and the water and the sunshine, little Ann."

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